When Wrestling Was Rasslin'

The Wild and Exciting Inside Story of the Legendary Houston Wrestling Promotion

By Wrestling Promoter
Peter Birkholz

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by Teresa Milbrodt and Tristan Palmgren

For my father and mother,

Mr. & Mrs. John D. Birkholz

Special Thanks

There are so many people that I would like to thank for their inspiration and words of encouragement. They were instrumental in helping me turn my dream into a reality.

First, I want to give a very special thank you to my two sons, Jonathan and Allan, along with their wives Suzanne and Rebecca. It was Jonathan and Allan who, after years of encouragement, finally convinced me to write the book. They wanted to read the story of their family's involvement in the fascinating world of professional wrestling. They mean the world to me and this story is for them! They were always there for support, and did not let the dream die.

I want to thank my wonderful parents, John and Rosalie, for their unconditional love and encouragement which they have always given me no matter what the situation, whether it is writing a book or facing the ongoing challenges of life. My mom is amazing, and her loving support has been a tremendous inspiration. Although my father is no longer with us, he has remained with me spiritually especially when I wrote about the stories we shared together.

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Finally, I want to thank the wrestlers, the promoters, and especially the wrestling fans that made all of this possible. Together we shared the color, excitement, the action and the thrill of professional wrestling—the greatest business in the world!

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FOREWORD

"Didn't you *used to be* Peter Birkholz from Houston Wrestling?"

It starts with the question, then the recognition, then the smile. The people approaching my dad would talk about their favorite wrestler, favorite match or memory. They would explain how they were at the Sam Houston Coliseum every Friday night when there was a match, or how they watched the Houston Wrestling show every time it was on television. Yet there was something more to these memories than just the wrestling match– sometimes they had shared these precious moments with family and friends that had since passed. To them, Houston Wrestling was something special.

My dad is familiar with the song and dance of public recognition from his days as a professional wrestling promoter. It could come from an electrician making a house call who recognized him from his television show on Channel 39, or an older man in a bait shop right before a family fishing trip. Even my high school assistant principal turned out to be a big fan of "Haystack" Calhoun. It could be in a grocery store, gas station, or restaurant. No place is safe. Dad can always find a wrestling fan in the Houston area.

I have often wondered--what is this "*used to be*" Peter Birkholz? He has always been my dad, and I never understood what the fuss was about. I knew that he was involved with promoting professional wrestling, and not many sons could say that about their father. However, it was not until he started writing this book and began using my brother and me as sounding boards for his stories that I started to understand how special Houston Wrestling really was.

The legendary Houston Wrestling promotion may have rung its final bell decades ago, but it is kept alive through fans that still remember and appreciate its renowned history. Evidence of this can be found on countless Internet chat rooms where pictures, programs and memories are shared

between wrestling fans–older fans who want to recollect their ringside experiences, and younger fans wondering what professional wrestling used to be. This was the era when men of honor ruled the ring, when the heels always cheated and still lost, and when the celebrated athletes of previous generations were still in their prime and no one could beat them. Wrestlers today often imitate these superstars of yesteryear, but they can never replicate Gorgeous George, Lou Thesz, Ed “Strangler” Lewis, or Buddy Rogers.

My dad’s book offers insight into the Houston Wrestling promotion that no one else can give. As a boy he viewed wrestling as any child would--the larger than life characters became his heroes! However, his life was different than most young wrestling fans. He had many opportunities to rub elbows with the giants of the ring. His uncle, Paul Boesch, was already in the professional wrestling business in Houston. The stars of the day that made their way through the territory could frequently be found at Boesch’s house or at family events. In his younger years, my dad mowed the yard for his uncle and would also mow the yard of “Dangerous” Danny McShane, who lived across the street from Paul. McShane was the nemesis of one of my dad’s favorite wrestlers, “El Medico.”

He, like most boys, imitated his favorites, and sometimes that got him into trouble. While in elementary school, the class bully broke his favorite crayon on purpose, and Dad responded with a classic “El Medico” brain buster. To his surprise it actually worked, sending the boy to the floor like a sack of potatoes. It was not enough to be in trouble with his teacher and parents. The fact that he received a rebuke from “El Medico” himself makes this story complete.

Working the Houston Wrestling promotion was not just left to his uncle, Paul Boesch. The entire Birkholz family was into wrestling. His father John was a wrestler, referee, and a security guard at events, and his mother, Rosalie, worked the box office and often babysat wrestlers' children when they were in town. He and his older brothers, Bill and Howard, were successful amateur wrestlers. A dangerous combination when combined with the costumes from their mother’s dancing school. Whenever their parents were out of the house, the three boys donned the props from the dancing school, created wrestling alter-egos, and put together make-shift wrestling matches much to the delight of their babysitters. His younger sister, Denise, somehow survived growing up in a house with three

wrestling older brothers and grew up to work the box office as well. It was a family business, and Dad, of course, worked there as well.

He started as a “go-fer,” taking care of small tasks and making sure the wrestlers had everything they needed. The older wrestlers took a liking to him, maybe it was because he reminded them of their sons they left back home while traveling, or maybe because they just liked seeing a young man working hard in the business which was their livelihood. They told him stories in the locker room or while on long car trips between venues, and he committed those tales to memory. When he shares these fantastic stories in this book, it is like you are hearing it straight from the legends themselves.

My dad took on more responsibilities as he grew older. He received a Masters in Business Administration from Sam Houston State, and eventually went back to teach management and marketing. With his business education in hand, he was conscripted to work full time for the family business. My dad’s rise in Houston Wrestling wasn’t overnight; it took decades of hard work and dedication to become Paul Boesch’s “right hand” and eventually put together his own promotions. It even took a fateful interview with Ernie Ladd for him to get in front of the camera instead of behind the scenes.

During this time, he got to meet an incredible cast of world-renowned wrestlers. He experienced the camaraderie of the dressing room before a match, the roar of the crowd in anticipation when the lights went out and the spotlight went on, and he knew the wrestlers as people when they were not in the ring. Some of them were larger than life like the characters they portrayed, some were professional athletes that found themselves in the ring for a few extra dollars, and others were normal family men trying to make a living. However, most of them wrestled because they loved wrestling and everything that it entailed.

By the time he was ready to be the named successor of Houston Wrestling, the era of regional wrestling promotions was in its twilight. The game stopped being about local wrestlers, fans, and matches, and became a fight for survival. The industry changed into a war between traditional regional promotions and the unstoppable national wrestling promotions that forever changed professional wrestling. This war was waged in television contracts, big mergers, backroom deals, and other bloodless business battles. In this book, my dad will explain what was *really* going on during the last years of the promotion.

Unfortunately, I do not have many wrestling memories to share. I was born in 1984, when the “die was already cast.” It was the beginning of the end. My Houston Wrestling memories are faded, as much a mix of fantasy and reality as wrestling itself. I was only three or four at the time. My dad took me to the matches and sat me in the highest corner away from the entire crowd. I remember the Road Warriors in their red and black make-up, wild hair, and shoulder pads with spikes. Ric Flair’s robe was particularly impressive--even from the “nosebleed” seats you could see it shimmer in the light. I recall the sound of a body slam against the mat and the roar of the crowd that followed; all of the sights and sounds that a night of Houston Wrestling had to offer. If you were there, you would remember as well.

However, I have one profound memory that stands out from the rest. My father sat me in my usual spot, the highest chair at the highest corner away from the action. He had to go work on something, but left me in the eyesight of my great-uncle Paul Boesch who was standing on the arena floor, surveying the entire scene. He watched the wrestlers in the ring, the reaction of the crowd, the admiration of the event. This had to be one of the last promotions that included the legendary promoter, the summation of a lifetime of work. I cannot imagine what was going through his head. Could he have been reflecting on Houston Wrestling’s past? He might have been thinking about all the memories he had in the Sam Houston Coliseum, the cast and characters who made their way down the aisle and into the ring. Or was he, knowing that his era was over, just enjoying the match like everyone else? Did he, in that brief moment, become another spectator caught in the wild spills and thrills that made professional wrestling fans go crazy? I’ll never know. My great Uncle Paul died of heart failure in 1989.

The Houston Wrestling offices were long ago shut down, and then torn down to make way for a parking lot. The Sam Houston Coliseum, a venue for numerous events, parted with its wrestling heritage like a garage sale before it, too, was brought to the ground to make way for progress. All that is physically left of Houston Wrestling are the programs and pictures shared in countless Internet chat rooms, and the heirlooms such as chairs, turnbuckles, and signs collecting dust in some attic or garage in the Houston area, or, worse, sold to the highest bidder online. But to those who were a part of Houston Wrestling--either as a wrestler, a fan, or somewhere in-between--Houston Wrestling will never be forgotten.

When Wresling Was Rasslin' is a celebration of the legacy of Houston Wrestling. Everyone who was anyone wrestled in Houston, and this book is a chronicle of wrestlers, events, and matches that cover an entire century of classic Houston Wrestling action. Armed with a one-of-a-kind collection of wrestling programs that goes back decades, and his memory of events through his own eyes and experiences, my dad opens the door to the past, allowing us to not only remember the legendary matches, but the legendary wrestlers. His insight is unparalleled; no one else can tell this story like he can.

If you consider yourself a fan of Houston Wrestling, while reading this book you can put yourself in your favorite seat in the coliseum, and relive the excitement as you turn each page. I hope you enjoy the stories as much as my dad enjoyed writing them.

Peter Allan Birkholz Jr.

THE WARM UP

There is an old Native American saying that states it takes a "thousand voices" to tell a story. Never has this been more true than in the story you are about to read. For this story is going to be told by a storyteller who has listened to a "thousand voices" and has experienced a thousand Houston Wrestling events as a child, teenager, member of a wrestling family, wrestling television producer, and wrestling promoter.

For over twenty years, numerous wrestling fans, friends and family members have encouraged me to write a book on Houston Wrestling—the promotion, the television show, the phenomenon. They felt it was a story that should be told by someone who knew and lived it. I have never thought of myself as an author, but I do enjoy telling a story, especially a great story.

The story of the legendary Houston Wrestling is just that--a great story! A great story that features many of professional wrestling's greatest superstars and fascinating folklore, along with some of the most creative innovations in the history of the sport and plenty of history-making events involving the legendary Houston Wrestling promotion. It is a story that any storyteller would be anxious to tell.

I was blessed to work with my uncle, the legendary Paul Boesch, for over twenty-five years. I had the privilege of growing up in a wrestling family because both my uncle and my father wrestled professionally. I was fortunate to work in the Houston Wrestling promotion, one of the most famous wrestling promotions in the history of the business. I also had the opportunity to listen to some of the greatest storytellers in the wrestling world. Among them were such greats and legends as Lou Thesz, Bronko Nagurski, Ernie Ladd, Nick Bockwinkel, Paul Boesch, Bronko Lubich, Fritz Von Erich, John Birkholz, Wahoo McDaniel, Jose Lothario, Johnny Valentine and dozens of other superstars.

I will make every effort to keep this story as factual as possible; however, please bear in mind that much of this story is comprised of a "thousand voices." Many of the tales were heard through several generations. There will be parts of this story that are comprised of historical records written by others who, despite their best efforts, may not have been one hundred percent correct. Parts of this story are based on my own

collection of Houston Wrestling programs that listed wrestlers on the weekly cards and chronicled major professional wrestling news. Parts of this story have also been told hundreds of times before they reached the ears of this storyteller. Finally, parts of this story will be told through the eyes and perspective of a storyteller who loved Houston Wrestling and, being only human, is vulnerable to recollections, emotions and perspectives that have been weathered by time.

How does a storyteller separate fact from folklore? Should he even try? Could it be that the wonderful combination of fact and folklore is what turns a story into a *great* story?

The bell has sounded! The floodgates have opened and thousands of stories are pouring out. Some of these stories are over a hundred years old. Other stories have never been written. Until now.

Houston Wrestling is truly a great and wonderful story. And I love to tell a great story!

THE HISTORICAL BEGINNING

The year is 1910. William Howard Taft, who was a wrestling champion at Yale University, is the President of the United States, but the United States is not the major player on the world stage that we would recognize today. Whether measured by political power, economic strength, or even sports, America is an afterthought to the rest of the world. Even American sports look very different: the Philadelphia A's are world champions in baseball, the Montreal Wanderers are the world champions in hockey, and Harvard and Pittsburgh are the NCAA champions in football. The National Football League is still a decade from becoming a reality. The National Basketball Association won't even be founded for another thirty years!

Back then, the world's oldest sport, wrestling, was surrounded by controversy. Two world-famous grapplers claimed the Professional Wrestling World Title. Georg Hackenshmidt, born in Estonia, was a tough wrestling champion of German descent. Hackenshmidt, who sometimes billed himself as "The Russian Lion," was crushing competition from all over the world, thus laying his claim to the championship. The other famous grappler was America's own Frank Gotch, a recent upstart on the professional wrestling scene. Wrestling fans around the world demanded a showdown! This match, like the following decade, would transform America's image and put this country on the world map of sports.

As America emerged, so did the city of Houston, Texas. In 1910, Houston had a population of approximately 80,000 and was still growing. The bustling city on the bayou was becoming a nationally-recognized center of commerce. City leaders were developing the Port of Houston, as well as enhancing its railway system. Another major factor in the rise of Houston was the tragic hurricane of 1900, which devastated neighboring

Galveston. Before the hurricane, Galveston was Houston's number one competitor in regards to commerce. After the storm, much of that commerce migrated inward to Houston, so the city was much like America--rising to newer and greater heights.

Houston's business and civic leaders were not totally satisfied with these great strides. They wanted more! They convinced the city of Houston to build a brand new state-of-the-art auditorium, which would help draw conventions and business activity to the Bayou City.

The city fathers decided to build a multi-purpose building at the corner of Texas Avenue and Louisiana Street, named City Auditorium.

On April 24, 1910, a Houston Chronicle article stated, "When completed this will be the largest fireproof auditorium in the South and it will represent an expenditure of $250,000. This auditorium, coupled with the million-dollar hotel to be erected, will render Houston the leading convention city of the Southwest. The promoters of the auditorium regard it as the greatest advertising feature which the city could possess."[1]

The City Auditorium opened on November 17, 1910, with the No-tsu-oh (Houston spelled backwards) Carnival Ball, the big social event of the year. The Carnival Ball was part of the No-tsu-oh festivities, which included poultry and pet shows, rodeo events, horse races, daily band concerts, and auto races.[2]

What a grand opening that must have been for the Grand Auditorium! It would become the permanent home for Houston Wrestling for the next forty-seven years.

The City Auditorium was indeed a multi-purpose facility. It was booked for conventions, concerts, dances, recitals, business events, political meetings, receptions, auto shows, poultry exhibits, private events, graduations, boxing matches, and most importantly for Houston Wrestling fans, professional wrestling. The Houston Symphony Orchestra also called the City Auditorium home for two decades. The Houston Symphony and Houston Wrestling were an interesting pair of roommates. They did team up one night to make Texas history, as you will read later.

The No-tsu-oh Carnival was followed by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. No doubt, it was this convention that featured the first showdown in the City Auditorium between the forces of good and evil. This classic showdown would be the backbone of thousands of Houston

Wrestling shows for nearly a half a century. The epic theme is the most essential concept of professional wrestling.

Little has been written about the history of Houston Wrestling in the years before the grand opening of the City Auditorium. Most folklore talks about traveling road shows and carnivals featuring professional wrestlers who would take on all comers from the audience. Sometimes a local town hero would prove a worthy opponent for the well-conditioned professional wrestler. When this happened, the opportunistic traveling promoter would have a special showdown with special showdown ticket prices to make more money.

This was common all around America during the turn of the century, but that was about to change because of an historic event: the long awaited rematch between rugged Georg Hackenschmidt and popular Frank Gotch. These two superstars wrestled once before in a controversial match in 1908. Frank Gotch was declared the winner; however, there was so much debate and international uproar that fans from around the world demanded a return match! When it comes to professional wrestling, some things never change.

The return match was a promoter's dream. It was held in the newly-opened Comiskey Park in Chicago on September 4, 1911. It was probably the most awaited showdown in the history of professional wrestling. Fans from every corner of the world anxiously awaited the outcome.

In front of a crowd of over 30,000, Frank Gotch won the rematch. However, once again accusations surrounded the victory. Nevertheless, Frank Gotch became the World Champion of professional wrestling, which helped put America on the world map of sports. So as America was emerging as a world power, so was its prestige in the wide world of sports. It is because of his astonishing victory over Hackenschmidt, and bringing the World Title to America, that Frank Gotch was given the title "Father of Professional Wrestling in America."

Frank Gotch's victory made him one of the most popular athletes in the world and started to put professional wrestling in the spotlight. This created an excellent opportunity for sports promoters across the nation to promote professional wrestling cards on their own merit. They no longer needed the association with traveling carnivals.

Now wrestling promoters became a breed of their own. The early days of professional wrestling saw several great promoters emerge around the country. Houston Wrestling was not an exception, and it was fortunate

to have two great wrestling promoters in the Sigel brothers: Julius and Morris.

According to Houston Wrestling folklore, Julius Sigel and his younger brother Morris were the first professional promoters to promote Houston Wrestling in the City Auditorium on a regular basis. They jointly promoted from 1915 to 1929. In 1929, Julius moved his efforts from Houston to New Orleans and Shreveport, Louisiana. Some say that he teamed with a promoter named Sam Avery to start Mid-South Wrestling. Ironically, that branch would establish a connection with Houston Wrestling some fifty-three years later, becoming a major factor in the final chapters of the Houston Wrestling promotion.

When Julius left, he handed off the Houston Wrestling promotion to his brother, Morris. Morris would promote Houston Wrestling in the City Auditorium for the next four decades, and reign as King of the Houston Wrestling promotion for over fifty-two years!

Most sources praise Morris Sigel as a man with good business sense and a very kind heart. Morris did not know much about professional wrestling, but he was smart enough to hire individuals who did. Morris also promoted other events including boxing matches and any other event he felt would make money. He had a stake in the food and drink concessions during the events he promoted, so it was to his advantage to promote as many events as possible. Morris Sigel has been given the credit as being the first promoter in the State of Texas to apply for and receive both a wrestling promoter’s license, as well as a license to promote boxing.

Not a lot has been written about the wrestling events that took place in Houston before the thirties. However, the years leading up to that time was a fascinating era for professional wrestling as it continued to develop.

The period between Frank Gotch’s shocking win and the thirties was an era of evolution and fan-oriented change for professional wrestling. Promoters and wrestlers realized that the sport needed to change to meet fan expectations. Legitimate wrestling matches could be grueling, and would sometimes last for hours. Fans got restless watching two grapplers in the same hold, sometimes for as long as thirty minutes or more. Professional wrestling had to compete for the spectator’s entertainment dollar with baseball, football, and boxing, among others. If professional wrestling wanted to be a successful spectator’s sport, then change was inevitable.

Professional wrestlers and promoters reverted back to a strategy of looking at wrestling as a business rather than as a sport. This was the same strategy which some traveling show promoters and wrestlers used around the turn of the century. It did not take long for those men to realize that if the wrestler would purposely let the local hometown favorite look good against him, then the promoter and wrestler would make more money.

It was not good business for the professional wrestler to quickly beat the hometown hero. It was much more profitable for the wrestler to make the local hero look like he might win, then let the time limit on the contest expire. The opportunistic promoter would quickly set up a "return" match and sell tickets for the "ultimate showdown." If done right, there would be a huge crowd at the showdown because all of the town's people would come out to cheer their local hero. Then the professional wrestler would not hold back, and beat the local hero. By this time, the promoter and wrestler would have plenty of cash in their pockets.

The strategy was known as "doing business." It did not involve scripted matches or predetermined winners, but was a means for the professional wrestler to beat his opponent or allow the other man to shine. At the appropriate time, the professional wrestler could defeat his foe, but "doing business" in this manner allowed wrestling promoters and wrestlers to make more money.

One could make the argument that for many years major sports have been focused more on making money than protecting the integrity of their sport. Look at the rule changes in the past few decades in many major sports. Baseball, for instance, would raise the pitcher's mound or lower it. Some baseball teams would bring in the fences for more home runs. The sport also changed the rules to allow designated hitters. These alterations were designed to provide more exciting action for their paying customers. Also, consider the rule changes designed to accommodate television because of funding the sport receives from television companies. Both professional and college football have recently changed the rule regarding the stopping then restarting of the game clock when a player or football goes out of bounds. This rule reduces the actual football action in the game and allows more commercial time. Doesn't that harm the integrity of football when playing time is greatly reduced because of commercial considerations? Money has controlled major sports for a long time and it

looks like it always will. Not all wrestling promoters and wrestlers would "do business." However, the ones that did made money and survived.

This evolutionary era of professional wrestling was also characterized by numerous wrestling legends. One of the most well known was the legendary Ed "Strangler" Lewis. Lewis started wrestling at the young age of fourteen and continued to be a major force in professional wrestling for over fifty years. Lewis was the World Heavyweight Champion for most of his history-making career. When he was not wrestling, he was dominating the business as a promoter and manager.

Lewis teamed up with Toots Mondt and Billy Sandow to promote professional wrestling. People in the business referred to them as the "Gold Dust Trio." This dynamic threesome was instrumental during the transitional years of professional wrestling as it moved out of the traveling shows and into its own business. Some credit these three men as being the first to promote wrestling cards on their own merit. They put together shows that featured several wrestling matches, rather than the one wrestling match strategy of the traveling shows.

Lewis retired from the ring in 1935 and then came out of retirement in 1942, even though he was legally blind from trachoma. After he could no longer wrestle, Lewis remained in professional wrestling by training new stars and then becoming their manager. The most famous was his good friend and number one protégé, six times World Champion Lou Thesz, who would go on to establish his own legendary legacy in the sport he loved.

Ed "Strangler" Lewis retired again in 1948, at the age of fifty-seven, after making a lot of money. He was an unbelievable athlete and a great box office attraction. Lewis was also known to be a man with a big heart, as he continued to help people who needed it. Unfortunately this combination--a man who loved a good time and who loved to help his fellow man--left Lewis destitute. The aging sports legend had to rely on his wife for financial support in his final years. He died on August 8, 1966 in New York. Ed "Strangler" Lewis played a major role in the history of Houston Wrestling, as you will soon discover. No one will ever match his reputation in and out of the ring.

Did Lewis treat professional wrestling as a sport or as a business? Did he "do business?" We will let wrestling historians and fans debate that question. All this storyteller knows is that Lewis' hand-picked protégé, the

legendary Lou Thesz, told him that Lewis could “break you in half or make you look like a million dollars.” Enough said.

In addition to being an era of change for professional wrestling, this period was also an era of change in the American sports world.

This story must also follow not only professional wrestling’s role in this history-making era, but also the emergence of professional football as a major sport. These two sports shared legends and stars.

One of the most colorful was Jumping Joe Savoldi, an All-American fullback for the Fighting Irish under legendary coach Knute Rockne. He earned the nickname “Jumping Joe” when he scored a touchdown against Carnegie Hall by jumping over the goal line. This was a novel move at the time and decades before the NCAA’s controversial excessive celebration penalty. Savoldi also scored the first ever touchdown in the brand new Notre Dame Stadium in 1930.

While playing in an All-Star football game in the Los Angeles Coliseum, Savoldi scored three touchdowns and was selected the MVP. More importantly, he caught the eyes of former World Champion Ed “Strangler” Lewis and wrestling promoter Billy Sandow. They convinced the superstar athlete that he could make more money in one wrestling match than in a whole season playing football for the Chicago Bears. They were absolutely right. At that time, professional wrestling paid a lot more than professional football. Football’s loss was a huge gain for professional wrestling!

Savoldi was famous for his “flying dropkick”--a wrestling move that consisted of Savoldi jumping high into the air and viciously driving both of his wrestling boots into his opponent's face. Savoldi was a tremendous athlete and a great draw at the box office because of his national exposure at Notre Dame. He also laid claim to the World Heavyweight Title after an extremely controversial win over World Champion Jim Londos in 1933 in Chicago Stadium, just down the road from the University of Notre Dame. Savoldi was clearly the “hometown boy,” and according to many in the wrestling business, he was the benefactor of a “double cross” hometown decision.

Referee Bobby Managoff declared Savoldi the winner when both he and Londos were tangled up in the ropes. Savoldi claimed victory and quickly left town. Londos claimed foul and continued to bill himself as the World Heavyweight Champion. The controversy was stoked by a fierce

promotional war waged by two rival wrestling organizations. Wrestling territories split between them, with each local promotion recognizing whichever World Champion was best for their respective businesses. Savoldi then lost his World Title to Jim Browning in Yankee Stadium later that year. Londos, on the other hand, continued to pursue Savoldi and demand justice.

The rival promotions kissed and made up so they could sign a return match between Londos and Savoldi. There was, of course, a lot of money to be made. Money was the primary reason for the promotional wars to end and for everybody to become bedfellows. Again, some things never seem to change in the sports world. Money remains one of the primary causes of corruption, yet also serves as a cure-all.

The return battle took place in Chicago Stadium on January 31, 1934, in front of over 20,000 anxious fans. Jim Londos was the winner, substantiating his claim as the Heavyweight Champion of the World.

During World War II, Joe Savoldi was a hero as he fought the Axis powers in a very dangerous espionage role. Being a natural born Italian who spoke the language, he was able to fight under cover in Italy. He became an important liaison between the Allies and the Italian Resistance, and proved to be a real champion in the field of battle, as well as in the wrestling ring.

Savoldi returned to professional wrestling after World War II. Years later, because of a long battle with arthritis, he retired from the ring and became a promoter. He promoted in the Chicago area, where fans still remembered his World Title win and his All-American playing days at Notre Dame. He retired in 1950 and went back to school to earn his teaching certificate. I am sure that Savoldi was one teacher that did not have any discipline problems in the classroom. He died in 1974 at the age of sixty-five. Savoldi played a very important role in the early days of both professional football and professional wrestling. He also had a crucial role in the development of a young and promising young wrestler from Long Beach, New York, by the name of Paul Boesch, my uncle, whom you will meet later.

Although Savoldi’s jump from football to wrestling was a big boost to professional wrestling, he was not the most famous athlete to have made the transition. That distinction goes to Bronko Nagurski.

Bronko Nagurski was born on November 3, 1908, in Rainy River, Ontario, Canada. Many football experts have labeled him the greatest

football player in history. Many professional wrestling experts have also called him one of the greatest wrestlers in wrestling history. One thing that sports experts of all ages and backgrounds can agree on is that he was one of the greatest athletes of all time.

Nagurski was blessed with outstanding God-given athletic ability along with a rugged toughness, both physical and mental. He came along at a time when professional football and professional wrestling were quickly maturing into major sports and they needed an athlete who was bigger than life. That was Bronko Nagurski.

Bronko Nagurski is a storyteller's dream, especially for this storyteller. There are countless tales inspired by his tremendous athletic feats.

I had the once-in-a-lifetime privilege of spending a day with Nagurski. It took place in 1971, when the Interfaith Charities Organization of Houston was honoring my uncle, Paul Boesch, as "Mr. Sportsman of the Year." Nagurski came to Houston to help my uncle celebrate, and to add a few kind words of respect.

I was only seventeen and could not fully appreciate the significance of that day. It's strange how often we do that when we're young. As I look back, I feel overwhelmed with gratitude--grateful that my uncle invited me along that special day, and grateful to Nagurski for sharing dozens and dozens of football and wrestling stories. He not only told some great stories, but he also answered this young storyteller's many questions. Looking back, I think Nagurski got a special kick out of retelling those stories to a young man, who sat there with mouth wide open and eyes as big as saucers.

He showed me his hands, and how each one of his fingers went in several different directions due to numerous broken fingers he suffered while playing football or wrestling. He reminded me that he used to play both ways in football. Then with a tremendous swell of pride, he talked about how, in those days, when you broke a finger you never took yourself out of the game. He said if you did then your teammates would call you a sissy. (Actually Nagurski had a more descriptive football term.) If a finger was broken, all you would do was run over to the sideline and they would quickly tape the finger to your other fingers in-between plays. Then you kept playing. "Those were the days," he said with a sigh, chest swelled full of pride.

Paul Boesch had made arrangements with NASA in Clear Lake for Bronko Nagurski to receive a special VIP tour of the agency and the new space lab that was about to be launched. NASA was thrilled to death to have Nagurski come out for the tour. NASA had their official reporter and photographer ready. As the photographer was snapping away and the reporter was asking his questions, doors opened up all along the hall we walked. Meetings were adjourned so that officials and astronauts could come out and meet Nagurski. In 1971, astronauts were considered national heroes, and rightfully so. Even forty years later, I still vividly remember how the astronauts crowded around Nagurski like a group of boys on the playground shaking his hand and getting his autograph! Thank you Lord! It was a very special day.

Professional football was Nagurski's first love. However the sport was struggling and he was not making much money. After the early seasons ended, professional football promoters would bill special “All-Star” football games around the country as they tried to make enough money to survive. Both promoters and players tried to a make a buck any way they could. Bronko Nagurski talked about how sometimes four to six football players would pile into one car and drive all night to save motel expenses, as they traveled up to one thousand miles to the next All-Star game. Remember, these were the days before automobile air conditioning and four-lane interstates. Pay-offs were as low as ten to twenty dollars a player.

Nagurski told me the story about a trip he made to Texas when he was booked for an All-Star game in San Antonio. He called Houston Wrestling promoter Morris Sigel and asked if he needed a wrestler the Friday night before the game. Nagurski had already been wrestling professionally around different parts of the country. Local promoters always jumped at the opportunity to have Nagurski on their wrestling card. His reputation sold a lot of tickets and added prestige to their promotion. Sigel quickly signed him. Nagurski told me how he made $350 wrestling for Sigel, and only $25 playing football in San Antonio that Saturday. He finished the story by explaining that he played football because he loved the sport, but he wrestled because he loved to eat.

The fact that Nagurski wrestled to supplement his football income did not mean he was not a great professional wrestler. He was a superb athlete and did well in any competitive sport. Nagurski became a huge hit both at the box office and in the ring. He has been credited for winning the World

Heavyweight Championship at least three times and could have been World Champion on even more occasions because professional wrestling records at that time were not well-recorded. Regardless of how many times Nagurski was recognized as the World Heavyweight Champion, he was without a doubt one of the most gifted and toughest athletes to ever step inside the ring.

Bronko Nagurski has been inducted into every professional wrestling Hall of Fame. This great honor gives him the distinction of being voted into the Hall of Fames of two different professional sports. His wrestling folklore is just as abundant as in football. There will be more wrestling stories about Nagurski as the story of Houston Wrestling continues. He was a great man, a superb athlete, and a true sports legend!

How does a storyteller separate fact from fiction in the case of Bronko Nagurski? Should he even try? Perhaps that is what makes Nagurski's tales a great story--it is yet another one told by a thousand voices.

Nagurski and Savoldi were not the only professional football players who made the switch from football to wrestling because of money. They were followed by dozens of other superstars who also left the gridiron for the much greener grass of the wrestling ring.

As professional wrestling and professional football were emerging nationwide, Houston Wrestling was emerging as a premier wrestling promotion. It would continue to produce fascinating history and folklore as it entered the 1930s.

HOUSTON WRESTLING IN THE THIRTIES

The decade of the thirties was a precarious time for both America and the Houston Wrestling promotion. It was the time of the Great Depression and a time of radical cultural changes in American society. It was also a time of radical change for professional sports as struggling promotions were going out of business from coast to coast.

The hard times made life difficult, and in some cases outright brutal, for millions of Americans. While the Depression put people out of work and bankrupted businesses, it also created unique opportunities. People were looking for an escape from the harsh realities of the real world, desperately trying to find heroes and hope.

The story of Houston Wrestling would not be complete without one such sports hero, a very special Houston phenomenon who called himself "Whiskers Savage." Some sources claim promoter Morris Sigel gave him that name, while others claim that Whiskers Savage himself was responsible for creating the character that will live in Houston Wrestling folklore forever.

According to Paul Boesch and others, Whiskers Savage was not much of an athlete or wrestler. However, he was one of the biggest box office attractions in Houston Wrestling history. He burst onto the scene during the Great Depression, and his gimmick character was perfect for the economic hard times. He dressed as a very poor farmer trying to make an honest living. He was so poor that he could not afford wrestling tights, wrestling boots, or a belt to hold up his worn-out jeans. He had to use a piece of rope tied around his waist so that his pants would stay up. What a perfect gimmick character during the heart of the Depression!

Houston Wrestling fans could really relate to Whiskers Savage. They scraped together whatever pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters they could

to buy a ticket to Houston Wrestling on Friday nights. Fans stood in long lines just for the chance to see their hero take on the bad guys and come out victorious.

As part of his gimmick, Whiskers brought his “pet chicken” to the ring and place the chicken on the top turnbuckle, where it remained until the match was over. All the wrestling fans thought he had a very well trained pet chicken. The fact of the matter was that with that many screaming fans the chicken was so scared he would not move. Lucky for Whiskers, the humane society was either not in existence or not aware of his “pet.” If the truth was known, it may have destroyed Whiskers’ gimmick.

Whiskers did not call the sport wrestling, but “scuffling.” He told fans that he loved to scuffle, and acted amazed that someone would actually pay him to scuffle. He had a broad smile and a happy attitude, a breath of fresh air at a time many Houstonians needed it.

What an amusing sight that must have been, watching that huge bearded man walking down the aisle with his “pet chicken” Sometimes he had the chicken on a leash. You have to love things like this--characters that only appear in professional wrestling!

Whiskers may not have been a champion wrestler. He was, however, a champion showman. Houston Wrestling fans loved him! One could make a very convincing argument that it was because they could all identify with him; he was just a poor hard-working American trying to make an honest living. Morris Sigel worked that angle to the hilt and made good money while other businesses were closing their doors.

The Friday nights at Houston Wrestling featuring Whiskers Savage not only gave wrestling fans a temporary relief from the harsh realities of the Depression, but hope as well. Hope that, just like Whiskers Savage, they could be victorious over the forces of evil. Historians write of the tremendous faith that Americans maintained during the Great Depression in spite of their overwhelming hardships. In Houston, hopeful wrestling fans not only had faith in America, they had faith in Whiskers Savage.

There was trouble brewing all over the world in the thirties, and Houston Wrestling provided an escape and reassurance that good could win over evil. Evil may win a battle here and there; however in professional wrestling, good always prevails. That fantasy helped them face harsh reality.

Out of all the regional promotions, Houston Wrestling was responsible for providing fans with most of the superstars of the day. Many of these men went on to become successful business leaders and professional wrestling promoters.

One cannot truly appreciate the color and glamor of Houston Wrestling without considering tough, arrogant, dynamic “Irish” Danny McShane. Danny McShane started wrestling in Texas in the thirties and continued an illustrious career that kept him wrestling over four decades. Danny McShane was born in rural Arkansas in 1912. He began his career the day he became legal age--his first match was the night he turned eighteen. He lost, which didn’t sit well with him. Over time, McShane developed his fighting skills and became an exceptional wrestler and boxer.

McShane stood 5’ 11” tall and during most of his wrestling career weighed just a little over 200 pounds. He was not as big as most of the top heavyweight contenders of that time; however, pound for pound, he may have been one of the toughest wrestlers to ever compete in the business. He was so tough and talented that he won not only the World Light Heavyweight Championship but also the World Junior Heavyweight Championship.

In addition to those two titles, McShane held numerous state and regional titles in the heavyweight division. It is no wonder that the proud Irishman never lacked for self-confidence. In fact, McShane had a swagger no other wrestler could match. Through the years, many tried to imitate his stride, but they could never duplicate it.

Besides his talent and toughness, McShane had a tremendous flair for showmanship. He was one of the first to wear long, fancy, beautiful robes. He knew how to talk the talk and walk the walk. I can still remember the McShane victory “strut” and the way he swiveled his hips so arrogantly that wrestling fans wanted to wring his neck. He was one of the first who knew how to put on a show.

His style and many tours of southern California made him wanted by Hollywood. Movie star Danny Kaye seemed to always find a part for McShane. He also had roles in various movies and was seen on several occasions socializing with Hollywood’s most famous stars.

“Irish” Danny McShane also earned the nickname “Dangerous” Danny McShane because of the fact that two of his opponents tragically died after wrestling him. Some claim it was McShane’s controversial pile

driver that killed them. In the pile driver, a wrestler would place the head of his opponent between his legs, then hoist the wrestler into the air. He would then drop his opponent on his head with the full weight of both wrestlers slamming the unprotected skull onto the hard wrestling ring. The two men were not killed in the ring, but sadly passed away a few hours after the match.

Did McShane's pile driver kill the wrestlers, or was it tragic timing and both wrestlers died due to other causes? McShane didn't intend to hurt the men, and after the second death, it was said that he almost quit wrestling. For the rest of his life, McShane never wanted to talk about those incidents

On a more personal note, McShane was not nearly as arrogant as his wrestling character. On many occasions, he showed a lot of class in helping other people and being a gentleman to the ladies. Danny McShane married Sallee Lewin, the sister of professional wrestlers Mark and Don Lewin. He made a heck of an impression. The first time Sallee laid eyes on the rugged Irishman was at a match between McShane and her brother, Don. She watched in horror as Dangerous Danny McShane broke Don's nose in a wild battle.

After retiring from wrestling, Danny continued to referee at Houston Wrestling for another two decades. Some mat experts claim he was the forerunner of Gorgeous George with his showmanship and toughness in the ring. Others claim he was the Hulk Hogan of the early decades of professional wrestling. Still others insist that his style inside and outside the ring inspired superstars like Buddy Rogers and "Nature Boy" Ric Flair.

McShane loved the wrestling business. He went out of his way to make sure that fans got their money's worth when they watched him wrestle. McShane gave one hundred ten percent, and his love for and dedication to the business was evident until the end.

On July 14, 1992, Danny was brought home from his nursing home to visit with family and close friends. After being asleep most of the day, he woke up and asked his good friend and fellow professional wrestler Tiger Conway Sr. where were they working that night.

Tiger smiled that big smile of his and told the ailing seventy-nine-year-old Danny not to worry, they were off that night.

Once Danny was assured that he was not missing a booking, he gently closed his eyes and passed away.

The thirties also witnessed the discovery and rise of future superstar Lou Thesz, who many claim to be the greatest wrestler of his time. It is impossible to fairly compare Lou Thesz against such legends as Frank Gotch, Georg Hackenschmidt, or Ed “Strangler” Lewis. The subject could be debated forever. However, a majority of wrestling historians agree that Thesz was one of the best the sport had to offer. In the eyes of this storyteller, Thesz was indeed “the greatest” during his prime. Nobody else in that era wrestled as many times or traveled as many miles during his reign as World Heavyweight Champion.

Lou Thesz held the title longer than anyone else up to that time. Some say that Thesz kept the World Heavyweight Championship for over ten years, a feat that still holds a special place in the history of professional wrestling.

Lou Thesz first won the World Title in 1939 by defeating Everett Marshall on December 29, 1937, at the young age of twenty-one. He won the World Heavyweight Championship for the sixth and final time in 1963 by defeating Buddy Rogers in a match that has been discussed for nearly fifty years. Thesz was the World Champion when professional wrestling was predominantly a sport learned in the gym. A man’s reputation was earned in the ring.

In 1932, Lou Thesz made his debut into professional wrestling, a sport dominated by rugged and dangerous veterans, when he was sixteen years old. He caught the eye of the legendary Hall of Famer Ed “Strangler” Lewis. For over twenty-nine years Lewis was the man to beat, yet he was getting older and searching for a protégé. He found an excellent one in young Thesz. Lewis took Thesz under his wing and taught him the dangerous art of “hooking.”

“Hooking” is the term used to describe the ability to stretch your opponent with painful holds that could break bones and require hospitalization afterward. Lou Thesz was such a feared hooker, and so proud of that fact, that he titled his autobiography Hooker. He sent me a copy of the manuscript before it was published, and I thoroughly enjoyed every word. Hooker is one of the best wrestling books I have ever read, and it is a must-read for anyone who is a fan of the great Lou Thesz.

Ed “Strangler” Lewis and Lou Thesz quickly became good friends. Lewis was able to stay in the business and make a lot of money managing his outstanding student, and Thesz continued to train under Lewis and

develop into a wrestling icon. It was a match made in heaven for Lewis and Thesz, and a match made in hell for opponents. Many of the stories in this book are ones Thesz told me himself.

The thirties also featured the debut of Warren Bockwinkel, a top talent and Houston Wrestling star. Warren brought his family to Houston, including his five-year-old son, Nick. Nick would grow up to become a major star, winning the American Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Championship, and numerous other titles during his long and illustrious career. At an early age, Nick developed a special liking for Houston and Paul Boesch. That relationship would eventually play a critical role in the final chapters of Houston Wrestling.

THE FORMIDABLE FORTIES

The decade of the forties was a formidable one for America and the Houston Wrestling promotion. With the vicious sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans were quickly drawn into the devastation of World War II. Professional wrestling, like all other major sports, watched their star athletes shipped off to war. Promoters and the few athletes left behind struggled to survive. Life was hard, and so was promoting professional sports.

Despite the challenging times, the Houston Wrestling promotion flourished due to the outstanding effort and skill of promoter Morris Sigel. He did a superb job of signing many of the top stars of that era. Many would have fantastic careers in the ring and become legends in the sport. Others became promoters and dynamic leaders in the wrestling business.

After one look at the impressive list of wrestling talent Sigel uncovered during the forties, you notice how many ended up in the various professional wrestling Hall of Fames.

Some of the legends who saw action at Houston Wrestling during this decade include: Lou Thesz, Leroy McGuirk, Wild Bill Longson, Paul Boesch, Danny McShane, Gorgeous George, Verne Gagne, Argentina Rocca, Lillian Ellison (The Fabulous Moolah), Stu Hart, Lord Jan Blears, Buddy Rogers, Bobby Managoff Jr., Mildred Burke, Irish Jim Casey, Bronko Nagurski, Whipper Watson, Dave Levin, Johnny Valentine, Rito Romero, Mike Mazurki, Primo Carnera, Wild Red Berry, Count Billy Varga, the Zaharias brothers, and countless others.

Two other superstars who made their debut in the late forties and established their own Houston Wrestling legacy in the fifties were Duke Keomuka and Blackie Guzman.

Those years also featured many Houston area stars--including Lou Plummer, who would eventually move to New Waverly and become a high school coach at New Waverly High School. Other local favorites were Sterling “Dizzy Davis,” Jimmy James, Al Lovelock, Marvin Jones, and Chester Hayes, a Sam Houston High School graduate who was an All-State selection in football and would go on to play football at Rice Institute. Handsome George Holmes also saw action in the Houston Wrestling ring, in-between the numerous movies he starred in while working for 20th Century Fox.

It was also an exciting time for Houston’s own Gorgeous George. Houston Wrestling fans witnessed firsthand Gorgeous George’s soon-to-be world-famous ring character evolve. George started the decade with short brown hair and no fancy robes or valet, but by the end of the forties, Gorgeous George had long, blonde, curly hair, dressed in fancy robes, and strutted down the aisle with his valet to “Pomp and Circumstance.”

It has been said that Gorgeous George would eventually have over one hundred fifty ornate robes made from different fabrics and jewels from around the world. He never wanted to be seen in the same town wearing the same robe. This storyteller is convinced that his wife, Kaye, and the legendary Gorgeous George are related.

It would not be until the fifties that Gorgeous George soared to his greatest heights. He not only became the “Toast of the Coast,” but the envy of much of the sports and entertainment world.

Sigel did a tremendous job of signing talent, and was responsible for establishing Houston as one of the premier World Title towns in the business. He transformed the promotion and turned Houston Wrestling into a red-hot, World Title market. This distinction would characterize the Houston Wrestling promotion for the next fifty years.

Throughout the war and post war years, many of the greatest World Title matches of the decade took place in the Houston Wrestling ring. That period began with Bronko Nagurski as the World Heavyweight Champion, and ended with Lou Thesz as World Champion.

Bobby Managoff won the World Heavyweight Title in the Houston Wrestling ring on November 27, 1942. For the next eight years Houston Wrestling fans witnessed an exciting parade of World Champions, including Bronko Nagurski, Ray Steele, Sandor Szabo, Wild Bill Longson, Yvon Robert, Bobby Managoff, Whipper Billy Watson, and finally Lou Thesz.

One of the most famous World Title showdowns in Houston that decade featured World Champion Wild Bill Longson against former World Champion Lou Thesz, with “special referee” former World Boxing Champion Jack Sharkey.

Jack Sharkey was no stranger to sports fans from around the world, as he had won the World Heavyweight Boxing Title by defeating Max Schmeling on June 21, 1932. Leave it to Sigel to make an outstanding World Title showdown between Longson and Thesz even bigger and better by putting Jack Sharkey in the ring. It was quite a feat for Promoter Morris Sigel to sign all three World Champions, and the event was a historical treat for the sold-out crowd.

The national spotlight of professional wrestling was focused on the City Auditorium on the night of December 12, 1947. The battle was everything fans and promoters had expected. Longson barely held on to his World Title in a bout that had both wrestling and boxing fans talking for many years. Houston Wrestling was indeed becoming one of top wrestling towns in the nation, a position the promotion would continue to maintain for decades.

Sigel also established the Houston Wrestling promotion as a strong weekly promotion, another distinction that shaped the image of Houston Wrestling for the next half century. This would become even more important with the invention of television.

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Try to imagine what it must have been like at a match in this era.

It is Friday, December 7, 1945, and the Houston Wrestling fans are filing into the City Auditorium. If you close your eyes, you may be able to hear the hustle and bustle of activity as thousands of wrestling fans file through noisy turnstiles. Young program sellers shout, “Get your lucky number program! This is your last chance to get your lucky number program!” Concession vendors yell, “Get your ice cold beer!” while others vend popcorn, peanuts, and hot dogs.

If you try hard enough, you can even feel the excitement in the air. This is not just any Friday night of Houston Wrestling. The main event is the long-awaited World Title match between World Heavyweight Champion

Wild Bill Longson from Salt Lake City, and top contender Lt. Paul Boesch from Long Beach, New York.

The national spotlight of professional wrestling is focused on Houston, fans anxiously waiting to see if Lt. Paul Boesch, the most decorated wrestler-soldier of World War II, can make a dream come true and defeat Wild Bill Longson for the World Heavyweight Title. How appropriate it would be for him to win the World Title on the fourth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. This is what a Cinderella sports story is all about.

It was the biggest match in Paul Boesch's wrestling career. The city of Houston was his second home, and the home crowd came out in force to cheer him on. He wanted to win the World Title not only for himself, but for the many wrestlers who put their careers on hold and fought for their country. He wanted to win it for the ones who could no longer wrestle due to wounds suffered in battle. But most importantly, he wanted to win it for the wrestlers who tragically never came back. He was ready! Houston was ready! The post-war wrestling world was ready!

Paul Boesch wrestled the greatest match of his career that night. Longson was one of the toughest World Champions in the sport's history. Boesch turned in a tremendous and inspirational effort, unfortunately, this was one Cinderella story that did not end as he and fans had hoped. Promoters were also pulling for Boesch because they were aware of the box office appeal that he would have had in their respective towns and territories.

But destiny is a precarious and powerful force. If Boesch had managed the huge upset, it would have changed the course of his life. More importantly, it would have drastically changed the course of Houston Wrestling. Boesch did not walk out the ring with the World Title belt, but he stayed in Houston for the rest of his life. By the end of the decade, Paul Boesch was the heart and soul of Houston Wrestling, a role he held for over forty years. Winning the title would have meant leaving Houston, so the lives he touched and the good deeds he accomplished would never have happened. Yes, destiny is a very precarious and powerful force.

That showdown capped a very successful 1945 Houston Wrestling year. Americans were ready for a more peaceful world, and Houston Wrestling fans were ready for Houston Wrestling to continue entertaining them without further disruptions from harsh realities.

Promoter Morris Sigel started the 1946 Houston Wrestling season with a dressing room full of talent. He had stars like colorful Buddy Rogers, Houston's own Sterling "Dizzy" Davis, Paul Boesch (who was no longer a lieutenant since he was honorably discharged), Whiskers Savage (who had earned enough money to buy wrestling tights and boots), Jim "Thunderbolt" Casey, Lou Plummer, Don Evans, Ellis Bashara, Houstonian Al Lovelock, and World Heavyweight Champion Wild Bill Longson. Sigel also had his staff primed and ready.

Listed below are the individuals and their job titles according to the Houston Wrestling program dated January 4, 1946:

Morris P. Sigel, Promoter and Owner
Frank J. Burke, Manager
Dr. Karl Sarpolis, Advisor
Adie Marks, Publicity Director
Jerry Shultz, Announcer and Ticket Sales
Bruce Layer, Radio Announcer
Leon Harrison and Fred Kohul, Timekeepers
Wm. R. Martin, Chief Usher
Miss Lee Stephenson, Secretary
Office Address: 502 Milam Bldg. Houston 2 Texas

Houston Wrestling tickets could be purchased in advance at the Auditorium Hotel Drug Store across the street from the City Auditorium. The phone number was B. 3-2636.

Ticket prices were:

Ringside $3.00
Arena $2.50 & $1.85
General Admission $1.20

There were no significant increases in ticket prices for many years, but remember, Morris Sigel also operated the food and drink concessions, which helped him make more money for every show he promoted. It was a great incentive for him to keep ticket prices low so attendance would be high and concessions would prosper. Again, Sigel proved himself a prudent businessman.

In addition to the wealth of talent, Sigel, with the advice of Doc Sarpolis, established the Texas Heavyweight Championship as one of the premier professional wrestling titles in the business. Most mat action during 1946 centered on the Texas Championship belt. The Texas Champion would be a top contender for the World Heavyweight Title when the Champion came to Houston.

One star of Houston Wrestling during the forties was the talented Buddy Rogers. Rogers' real name was Herman Rohde, and he was born on

February 20, 1921, in Camden, New Jersey. “Buddy Rogers” was later born in the office of Promoter Morris Sigel. Some wrestling sources credit Sigel for renaming Herman after a movie character, while other sources credit Herman himself. Regardless, Sigel and Herman worked together to developed the flashy character who would be one of the sport’s most famous stars.

It is hard to imagine that either man realized how monumental their creation would become as they sat in Sigel’s office, yet together they spent the next few years developing Buddy Rogers into a wrestling icon. This was a classic example of how a sports promoter and an athlete could work together to create a superstar. The promoter made the star, and in turn the star made the promoter. Together they created a synergy that propelled both individuals to new heights. Sigel gave Buddy Rogers the push outside the ring, including making him the Texas Heavyweight champion. Inside the ring, Rogers delivered the kind of action that made him an exciting star to watch and a record-setting box office attraction.

During his career, “Nature Boy” Buddy Rogers held numerous wrestling titles, including both the National Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Title and the World Wide Wrestling Federation (the forerunner of the WWE) World Heavyweight Title. For decades, he was the only man to win World Titles from both major wrestling organizations. Interestingly, the second man to accomplish that feat grew up idolizing “Nature Boy” Buddy Rogers and designed his own wrestling character after the superstar. That man was “Nature Boy” Ric Flair.

Buddy Rogers’ flamboyant image and action-oriented style in the ring made him a natural for the golden years of television: the fifties. Whether working for the National Wrestling Alliance or the Word Wide Wrestling Federation, his unique combination created a legend. No matter what territory the blonde grappler worked, he was a superstar in the ring and at the box office. Even after he retired from wrestling, he made his rounds by acting as a manager for promising wrestling talent. His experience and knowledge helped take those athletes to the next level.

Rogers died of a heart attack on June 26, 1992. Some wrestling officials claim he was in training for yet another comeback at the age of seventy. If you knew Buddy Rogers, you would know that was not out of the realm of possibility. That was Buddy Rogers!

The forties was not only a history-making decade for male wrestlers at Houston Wrestling; it was a history-making decade for female wrestlers. Those years started by featuring Mildred Burke, who claimed to be the best female wrestler in the world, and finished with the debut of Lillian Ellison, better known as “The Fabulous Moolah.” She dominated the female pro-wrestling world for the next four decades.

Mildred Burke was one of the most fascinating female wrestlers to step inside the male-dominated ring. According to the Houston Wrestling Program of October 3, 1946, she was working at the YMCA in Kansas City as a stenographer and bookkeeper. Also working at the YMCA was professional wrestler Billy Wolfe, who had his own wrestling school on the side. Mildred became interested in wrestling and approached Wolfe about training her to be a wrestler.

Wolfe did not like the idea, and quickly put her in the ring with a man. He gave Burke's opponent instructions to “rough her up” so she would be sent packing. His strategy backfired: Burke quickly beat the male contender. She went on to defeat all other wrestlers in Wolfe’s wrestling school, male and female. It was a very impressive feat, and Wolfe became so convinced of her wrestling ability and toughness that he trained her and became her manager.

There are numerous stories of her toughness, but this storyteller’s favorite is the one in which Burke quickly won a match in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Afterward, some fans were giving her a hard time. Her manager stepped inside the ring, took the microphone, and removed a one hundred dollar bill from his wallet. He announced that he would give any man or woman roughly the same size as Mildred the bill if they could last twenty minutes with her in the ring. One man quickly volunteered. He was a football player and entered the ring confident and cocky. He started showboating, making fun of Mildred, but she grabbed him and not only beat him, but also broke his arm with her famous arm bar hold! Needless to say, he did not collect the prize.

Wolfe was not only impressed with Burke's toughness but her beauty. They eventually married. This storyteller is not sure who proposed, but if it was Mildred Burke who took the initiative, one can only assume that Billy Wolfe’s answer was “Yes ma’am!”

You would think a woman that tough would have grown up a tomboy, however that was not the case with Burke. She played with dolls and other

toys for sweet little girls, and as a woman she loved dressing up in beautiful gowns and high heels. Burke loved diamonds and wore huge rings, which were likely purchased from the $30,000 a year she was making. In the early forties, that was big bucks! She took a great deal of pride in her cooking as well. She boasted that she made the best chili and cherry pie in the country, but who was going to argue?

Burke stood five feet three inches and weighed only one hundred fifteen pounds when she started wrestling. She was petite, she was beautiful,.but most importantly, she was tough! There was little official recognition given to the so-called World Champion of female wrestling in the early forties. However, nobody disputed her claim to the title, especially the football player from Vicksburg, Mississippi.

As female wrestling started to become more popular in the forties, Houston Wrestling laid claim to their own local female star, June Byers. June was five feet seven and a half inches tall and weighed 145 pounds. She was born in Houston, attended public school there, and was inspired to be a female wrestler after attending Houston Wrestling and witnessing the wild excitement. She was hooked. Byers trained on the east coast and quickly became a star. During her illustrious career, several wrestling organizations recognized her as their female World Champion, but she was Houston Wrestling's first and most famous homegrown female wrestling superstar.

The female wrestler who dominated professional wrestling ranks longer than any other was Lillian Ellison, known worldwide as "The Fabulous Moolah." She made her Houston Wrestling debut in 1948, and for the next forty years would be recognized by various wrestling organizations as the Women's Wrestling World Champion. "The Fabulous Moolah" was also the first lady wrestler to be voted into a professional wrestling Hall of Fame.

Mary Lillian Ellison was born in 1923 in South Carolina. She was the youngest of thirteen children and the only girl, so it's no wonder she grew up to be tough. Ellison was inspired to be a female wrestler after she watched the legendary Mildred Burke compete at local matches. Ellison vowed to become a lady wrestler one day, but married when she was only fourteen years old and at age fifteen she gave birth to a baby girl. She divorced her husband and left her daughter with a friend so she could pursue her wrestling dream.

She began her career with Mildred Burke's husband Billy Wolfe, who at that time was one of the premier women's wrestling promoters. Wolfe and Mildred Burke trained Ellison and gave the young star her first major push. Ellison broke away from the husband-and-wife team when she started a romance with professional wrestler Johnny Long. Long introduced her to the famous promoter Jack Pfeffer, who changed her name to "Slave Girl Moolah." (Pfeffer was also instrumental in helping the career of another future wrestling superstar, Paul Boesch. However that is another story, for a different chapter.)

As "Slave Girl Moolah," Ellison continued to wrestle, but also became a valet to the legendary Buddy Rogers. After she broke up with Buddy Rogers for personal reasons, she served as valet to the Elephant Boy, another professional wrestler. Soon she was given the ring name of "The Fabulous Moolah" by Vince McMahon Sr., the father of the current King of professional wrestling, Vince McMahon of the WWE. Although The Fabulous Moolah was a great valet, she was an even better wrestler.

As mentioned before, "The Fabulous Moolah" was recognized as the Women's Wrestling World Champion by more organizations for more years than any other lady wrestler in the history of the business. On June 24, 1995, she became the first female wrestler inducted into a professional wrestling Hall of Fame. She passed away on November 2, 2007. I enjoyed the times that I was able to book "The Fabulous Moolah" on my wrestling cards, as there will never be another like her.

One of the most interesting and often discussed events of the forties was the night that the Houston Symphony and Houston Wrestling teamed up to raise funds for World War II by selling war bonds. These War bonds were used to gain admittance to a World Title wrestling card promoted by Morris Sigel in the City Auditorium. The Houston Symphony's CEO, philanthropist Roy Cullen, was an oil tycoon and one of the richest men in the world. That unforgettable show took place on Friday, January 21, 1944, and featured wrestling matches with the Houston Symphony playing music in between bouts.

The event filled the City Auditorium with Houston Wrestling fans sitting next to Houston Symphony fans. This evening was notable not only because of the huge amount of money raised, but because Ellis Bashara, who wrestled on the card, stole the show. After his win over Dave Levin, Bashara walked up to symphony conductor Ernst Hoffmann, and gently

took his conductor's baton. Sweaty and bloody and still wearing only his wrestling tights, Bashara started to conduct the symphony, much to the delight of thousands of wrestling fans, and much to the shock of thousands of horrified symphony fans. Bashara had been a music major in college, and so he did indeed know how to conduct a symphony orchestra. One Houston music critic was extremely upset because he was certain Bashara had set the Houston Symphony back fifty years!

On the contrary, the event was a successful and appreciated public relations campaign for both entities. Sigel and Cullen raised over one million dollars for the war effort, and people from all over the state of Texas fondly recalled the event for years. This evening was also mentioned by author Bryan Burrough in his recently-published book, The Big Rich.

A picture of Ellis Bashara leading the Houston Symphony, to the right is the original program that matches with the matches, and the symphony musicians between, below the picture of Bashara is the original War Bond Ticket.

In 1944 a joint benefit performance by wrestlers and the Houston Symphony Orchestra brought in over a million dollars in war bonds. Ellis Bashara, jubilant in victory, pushed the conductor aside after his match to lead the orchestra himself.

Program

"The Star-Spangled Banner"
"Stars and Stripes Forever" ..... Houston Symphony Orchestra
Ernst Hoffmann, Conductor

☆

FRANK BROWN vs. JACK KELLY
15 Minutes

Morton Gould's "Broadway" ..... By Houston Symphony Orchestra

☆

ANGELO CISTOLDI vs. KOLA KWARIANI

Boston Symphonic arrangement—Medley of "Deep in the Heart of Texas" and "Field Parking Manoeuvres" ..... By Houston Symphony Orchestra

☆

For the First Time in the History of Wrestling!

ELLIS BASHARA vs. DAVE LEVIN

(This match to be set to a symphonic arrangement by the orchestra)

☆

KING KONG COX vs. HIGH JACK KENNEDY

"Blue Danube" ..... By Houston Symphony Orchestra

☆

World Heavy Weight Championship

WILD BILL LONGSON (CHAMPION) vs. LOUIS THESZ (CHALLENGER)

Salt Lake City, Utah — Houston, Texas

☆

Dr. Karl Forgeils and Child Little Beaver, Referees

Between Falls—U. S. Artillery March by Sousa

Morris Sigel was always coming up with creative new promotions, from male wrestlers to female wrestlers to midget wrestlers. Because he couldn't allow his promotions to become stagnant, Sigel decided that he could make money by promoting wrestling animals. This idea provided Houston Wrestling fans with wild entertainment. However, one promotion almost had a tragic ending.

On Friday, March 21, 1947, the Houston Wrestling show featured a special attraction that pitted Gil “Gator Man” Woodworth against a ten-foot alligator. As you have likely figured out, Gil was a professional wrestler and alligator trainer. His body was covered with scars he'd received while wrestling alligators. We are not certain if the scars resulted from a lack of training or the fact that an alligator cannot be completely trained. Either way, traveling the country wrestling a ten-foot alligator was a dangerous way to make a living. As the highlight of the showdown, Gil put his entire head inside the alligator’s mouth. Although he was holding the jaws open, if the alligator wanted to close its mouth, it could have done so. Thankfully, that night the alligator kept his jaws open, which was good news for wrestling fans and even better news for Gil “Gator Man” Woodworth.

The wrestling alligator promotion was a booming success, and fans talked about it for months. Sigel decided to go one step further and book a wrestling lion!

The showdown between “Leo the Lion,” who weighed over four hundred pounds, and “Daniel the Man,” who weighed only 175 pounds, took place on Friday, April 16,[h] 1948. It was billed as a special exhibition because the Texas wrestling commission would not sanction the event. Sigel was determined to promote the show anyway. He devised a way to get around the wrestling commission’s rules by advertising that the bout with the lion would take place after the sanctioned Houston Wrestling card. After the main event, the ringside announcer would announce that the official wrestling show was over. The lights would be turned out for a few seconds, then turned back on for the special exhibition.

After a wild battle between Irish Danny McShane and Dizzy Davis, ringside announcer Bill Whitmore made the announcement and the lights were turned out. The lights came back on as Houston Wrestling fans anxiously watched the arena crew. They erected a cage around the ring, then Leo the Lion was brought ringside inside his traveling cage. During the process, Leo was roaring defiantly. Wrestling fans held their breath as the

lion was transferred from the traveling cage to the one surrounding the wrestling ring. Leo was clearly agitated, making some fans concerned about whether Daniel the Man should get in the ring. It might be too dangerous for him, though he was both a wrestler and a lion trainer. No doubt there were many who thought the event should be called off!

However, the show must go on. Daniel the Man stepped inside the cage to face the angry lion. The two quickly clashed and the auditorium was filled with anxious screams from fans. Others held their breath as lion and man rolled around the ring. According to Paul Boesch, who was ringside along with other wrestlers in case of an emergency, Daniel the Man looked terrified and concerned. Boesch said you could feel the tension of the moment building and building. Something had spooked the lion, and it was angry.

Suddenly, the lion broke loose from Daniel's grip and went to the far end of the cage. With a final roar of defiance, it sprinted across the ring and leaped high into the air in a desperate attempt to escape the cage! The four-hundred-pound lion landed on the cage wall, with half of his body hanging outside. He frantically kicked his legs to get free. The City Auditorium filled with terrified screams from wrestling fans. A tragic stampede toward the exits was seconds away. Paul Boesch and the other wrestlers hit the side of the cage as hard as they could. Thank God the lion lost its grip and fell back into the steel enclosure. The exhibition was called off and Houston Wrestling fans, some of whom were in tears, headed for the doors. The lion was herded into its traveling cage and taken from the City Auditorium.

Lord knows how many lives could have been lost if the lion had gotten free and unleashed pandemonium. The State of Texas wrestling commission and Sigel agreed that never again would Houston Wrestling feature a wrestling lion!

Sigel learned a valuable lesson that night, and for the rest of his approximately twenty years of promotion, the only wrestling animals he featured were well-trained wrestling bears that had reputations for being safe. Sigel never again wanted a situation like Leo the Lion. He also made sure that every precaution was taken to protect his fans.

As you can imagine, the wrestling bears brought their own stories. The first bear to make its way into the Houston Wrestling ring was named Ginger. That event took place on Friday, June 17, 1949. Ginger was a four-year-old, six foot-tall bear who weighed over three hundred pounds and was

still growing. She wrestled wild Dizzy Davis, and the two of them put on quite a show. The bear was such a hit with Houston Wrestling fans that Sigel brought Ginger back to tag team with Houston's own long-haired Whiskers Savage. What a pair those two must have made!

Another history-shaping event which drastically affected Houston wrestling was a devastating automobile accident that involved Paul Boesch. On October 23, 1947, Boesch started to drive to Corpus Christi for his next booking after wrestling in San Antonio. A truck ran a stop sign and smashed into Boesch's car. This was before the days of seat belts and air bags, so Boesch was severely injured and almost killed.

His wrestling career came to a quick halt. Bocsch could not wrestle. He had no money or other profession to fall back on, and needed to support his wife. He was in desperate trouble.

In this case, the white knight on the white horse turned out to be Houston Wrestling promoter Morris Sigel. He created an office job so Boesch could put food on the table for himself and his wife Eleonore. Boesch began to work public relations events for Sigel and the Houston Wrestling promotion. He also started broadcasting wrestling matches on radio station KLEE. Boesch was in position to be the first broadcaster of the Houston Wrestling television show when TV came to Houston in 1949. *Houston Wrestling with Paul Boesch* was the first locally-produced sports television show. Wrestling fans know the rest of the story. Boesch went on to become the heart and soul of Houston Wrestling for the next forty years. Yes, destiny is a precarious and powerful force.

THE FABULOUS FIFTIES

The fifties were indeed a fabulous decade for professional wrestling. With the invention of television, professional wrestling was elevated to heights that have never been reached again (though the WWE has come close on occasion).

Can you imagine what your life would be without television? What about major sports? Even as this story is being written, television continues to have a major influence on the development of professional sports. I worry it will only get bigger in the future.

In the pioneer days of television, professional wrestling and boxing were the perfect sports for broadcasting. The average television camera weighed over four hundred pounds and thus could not be easily moved, so it had to remain stationary and focus on a set object. Wrestling and boxing rings were ideal. Television production crews could set up one camera as the constant "wide shot" of the ring itself. The second camera was also stationary; however, it could zoom in and out to get closer shots.

Lighting was another challenge for production crews. Due to the many limitations of technology, the cameras needed abundant light. Once again, wrestling and boxing rings provided the perfect conditions, since all the television crews had to do was set up huge television lights above the stationary ring and on the four corner ring posts. Football fields and baseball fields did not have the sufficient lighting for television back then (though as you know, all of that has changed!). Thus, when it came to television sports programming in the early fifties, the media was married to wrestling and boxing.

KLEE was the first television station in Houston, and only the 12th station in the country. It was owned by W. Albert Lee, an hotelier and

commercial property realtor. The station started broadcasting on January 1, 1949. According to Paul Boesch, there were only two television programs that aired that week. One was *The Milton Berle Show*, and the other was *Houston Wrestling with Paul Boesch*. The Houston Wrestling television show became an icon in Houston, as it stayed on the air for over thirty-nine years!

During that time there were several changes to the station itself. In 1950, KLEE was sold to the Hobby Family, which also owned the *Houston Post* and radio station KPRC. They quickly changed the call letters of the television station from KLEE to KPRC to correlate with their radio station. It was an NBC affiliate and the only television station in Houston for five years.

When the new Channel 13 station went on the air, *Houston Wrestling* moved to it because television station KPRC was having trouble fitting the locally-produced shows into their jam-packed nationally-syndicated program line-up. The Houston Wrestling show stayed on Channel 13 until January 6, 1967, when it moved to Channel 39. The show remained there for over twenty years.

In its early years, the Houston Wrestling television show began by playing T*he Star Spangled Banner* at 8:30 PM. It was on the air until the lights were turned out at the City Auditorium. Wrestling fans who could not make it to the live show scrambled to find television sets where they could watch. Retail stores had televisions set up in their windows and showrooms to draw in potential customers. Houston's Main Street had crowds gathered around the stores, cheering on their heroes. Some business owners set up rows of benches for fans to sit on as they rallied their favorites against the "bad" guys.

Other wrestling fans flocked to a tremendous number of block parties that took place every Friday night. Fans gathered at the homes of neighbors who had television sets, bringing snacks and drinks. I even heard a story from one longtime wrestling fan who went with her family to a neighbor's house and literally crawled into bed with them because their television set was in the master bedroom. Together they hooted and hollered and had a great time!

However, all good things must come to an end, as the saying goes. This was the case with the "live" Houston Wrestling telecasts. Attendance at the matches was dropping, and Houston wrestling fans soon decided they

could stay at home and not buy tickets. That was not good news for Morris Sigel, who not only made his money at the gate but also at the concession stands. Wrestlers were also concerned since their compensation was based on box office receipts. Sigel moved the telecast to 10 pm on Friday nights and did not televise the semi-finals and main events. This was the beginning of the strategy wrestling promoters would use for the next four decades. They used television shows to “tease” and live wrestling shows to “please.”

With the addition of television to the professional wrestling world, promoters had to provide top stars and the most exciting action. Promoters not only had to please the fans in attendance, but the huge television audiences at home. Sigel was quick to respond to this new challenge, as you will soon learn.

The Fabulous Fifties at Houston Wrestling started off in grand style with the rise of future Hall of Famer Verne Gagne, who successfully defended his Texas Heavyweight Championship belt on January 6, 1950, against King Kong Cox. According to the corresponding Houston Wrestling program, the victory kept Gagne undefeated in the professional ranks. This should not be surprising, since Gagne entered professional wrestling with one of the most impressive amateur wrestling careers in the sport’s history.

Verne Gagne was born on February 26, 1926, in Robbinsdale, Minnesota. He left home at the young age of fourteen after his mother died. While in high school, this exceptional athlete was a star in wrestling, baseball, and football. He won the state wrestling championship in his weight class and was also named to the All-State football team.

The University of Minnesota, the same college that signed on the legendary Bronko Nagurski in the late twenties, recruited Gagne in 1943. As a football player he was named to the All-Conference team. As a wrestler he won two NCAA championships. Gagne was also named to the 1948 United States Olympic wrestling team. The coaches were hesitant to have him compete after they discovered that, in his early days, he had earned prize money by winning a wrestling contest at a traveling carnival. They were concerned that his “amateur” status would be challenged.

Again like Bronko Nagurski, Gagne was drafted by the Chicago Bears. Although Gagne had the opportunity for a great career in professional football, the gifted athlete decided to follow the money to professional wrestling. Gagne was an instant star with his outstanding technical wrestling ability and his good old American boy image, especially

since he represented the United States on the Olympic wrestling team. According to folklore, Gagne was one of numerous professional wrestling stars who earned over six figures each year during the golden days of professional wrestling in the fifties. That was big money, especially if you consider that wrestling promoters paid in cash.

None other than Houston Wrestling promoter Morris Sigel gave Verne Gagne his first start in a top wrestling town. Sigel himself fastened the Texas Heavyweight Championship belt around Gagne's waist. The championship belt was a very prestigious symbol, second only to the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) World Heavyweight Championship belt. Crafty Sigel played up Gagne's All-American image, and Gagne became the storybook good guy, or in professional wrestling terms, the "baby face."

On Friday January 13, 1950, Texas Heavyweight champion Verne Gagne faced the rugged and dangerous Irish Danny McShane. Both Friday the 13th and the rugged toughness of Danny McShane were too much for Gagne, and McShane became the new Texas Heavyweight champion.

Over the course of his wrestling career, Gagne held numerous titles, including the NWA World Junior Heavyweight Championship. Some wrestling promoters pushed for him to be awarded the NWA World Heavyweight Championship belt. However, politics played against the popular star, and the championship committee decided against the move. This did not stop some regional promoters in the NWA from breaking away and recognizing Gagne as their World Heavyweight Champion.

Although Gagne was a superstar in the NWA, most wrestling fans and historians will remember him more for his role in the American Wrestling Association (AWA). Gagne started the AWA in 1960, and performed several key roles in his new organization. He was part owner, one of the promoters, and, interestingly enough, he quickly recognized himself as the World Heavyweight Champion. When wrestling officials criticized that last move, he boldly challenged anybody to take the World Title belt away from him. The critics remained quiet.

Gagne was the AWA World Heavyweight Champion nine times, and the organization's top star for over thirty years. The AWA provided wrestling fans in the Midwest with action and excitement for decades, and it was a training ground for many of the sport's future stars, some trained by Gagne himself. He also played a major role in developing the iconic Hulk

Hogan, a decision that would come back to haunt him and the AWA. Hogan jumped from the AWA to Vince McMahon's WWF just as McMahon was readying to take his promotional organization nationwide. Vince needed Hulk Hogan, so he went out and got him! Gagne and the AWA folded in 1991, with Gagne himself being forced to file for personal bankruptcy.

No matter what problems Verne Gagne had outside the ring, no one can dispute that he was one of the greatest wrestlers the sport has ever seen, which explains why he was elected to every professional wrestling Hall of Fame.

In addition to Gagne and McShane, Sigel had other great wrestling talent to start the decade: Blackie Guzman, Wild Red Berry, Rito Romero, Sonny Myers, World Champion Lou Thesz, World Women's Champion Mildred Burke, Count Billy Varga, Killer Kowalski, Duke Keomuka, Danny Savich, and many others who made their way to the Houston Wrestling promotion.

Even Gorgeous George would fly in from the west coast to give Sigel dates for the Houston Wrestling promotion. By that time, Gorgeous George was "The Toast of the Coast," and his character was nearly fully developed. His long blonde curls were professionally cared for, and his valet sprayed the ring with his favorite perfume before each match. He entered the ring in his flamboyant robes. Wrestling fans across the nation saw him on television, and as you will soon read, his star would rise to even greater heights later in this decade. Gorgeous George's publicity releases were already touting him as, "the greatest combination of crowd pleasing showmanship and downright wrestling ability that the game has ever seen."

Houston Wrestling action was hot and heavy in 1950 as more wrestling stars came to town. Sigel carefully featured them in exciting showdowns, most of which were centered around the Texas Heavyweight Championship belt. There were several appearances by World Champion Lou Thesz against top ranked opponents, such as Killer Kowalski. Kowalski stood six feet seven inches tall, weighed over 272 pounds, and was the forerunner of future giants like Ernie Ladd and, more importantly, Andre the Giant. Kowalski was a tremendous athlete, and given the nickname "Killer" because during one of his matches he literally tore the ear off his opponent. The bloody ear was lying on the mat, so the referee picked it up, put it in his pocket, and returned the ear to its rightful owner in the dressing room after the battle. Incidentally, Kowalski won the match.

But Thesz was not only victorious over Killer Kowalski, he also successfully defended his title against contenders like World Junior Heavyweight Champion Verne Gagne and “Nature Boy” Buddy Rogers. In addition to these World Title showdowns, Houston Wrestling fans were treated to the first-ever six-man tag-team “gang war.”

The biggest card of the 1950 wrestling season was a promotion that Morris Sigel put together and booked in the Sam Houston Coliseum instead of the City Auditorium because the card was so big. Those of you not familiar with Houston should know that the Sam Houston Coliseum was just a few blocks from the City Auditorium, and could hold a wrestling crowd of ten thousand fans (whereas the City Auditorium could only seat four thousand). The card was billed as one of the biggest wrestling shows in the history of the Southwest. Sigel's lineup was capped off by the showdown between Thesz and Killer Kowalski. On that same card, Danny McShane wrestled Blackie Guzman for the Texas Heavyweight title. Fans were also treated to the Texas Girls' title match, the Texas Tag Team title match, and the recognized Negro Champion Don Blackman put his title on the line against Don Kindred. Even the referees that night were impressive, including Ed “Strangler” Lewis, Leo Voss, and Paul Boesch. The historic Sam Houston Coliseum would eventually become the home of Houston Wrestling after the City Auditorium was torn down in the sixties.

The Houston Wrestling programs sold at the matches also informed fans about what was going on elsewhere in the wrestling world. The September 1, 1950 program explained to fans how one of their favorite wrestlers, Leroy McGuirk, had tragically lost his remaining eyesight. The program also let fans know that Leroy was involved in the Tulsa, Oklahoma wrestling office and was determined to stay in the business. The program from November 17, 1950 announced the new World Junior Heavyweight Champion, Verne Gagne, who won a tournament in Tulsa, one that was held to select a new champion to replace the now-blind McGuirk.

This was also the year that Sigel continued to rise in the ranks of the NWA, as he was elected 1st vice president. Sigel and Houston Wrestling were making their mark in the wrestling world, and he was determined to to keep the momentum going into the 1951 season. It was a challenge for a promoter to follow a great promotional year with another record-setting season. Sometimes a promoter succeeded and sometimes he did not, but the goal was to attempt to make the promotion bigger and better every year.

A literally big star arrived on the scene in 1951. Joe Vitale, wrestling under the moniker Big Humphrey, weighed over 320 pounds and looked like the Humphrey Pennyworth cartoon character in the Joe Palouka comic strip. The colorful grappler was a hit with Houston Wrestling fans and wrestled in Houston for many years. However, his Houston legacy didn't end in the ring. In 1954, Humphrey opened a restaurant named Big Humphrey's Burger Village at 7661 Park Place Boulevard. Even after Humphrey's death in 1977, his family continued in the restaurant business with Big Humphrey's Pizza and Italian Restaurant in Pearland, Texas. His son Jasper and Jasper's wife Glenda proudly display sports memorabilia from the good ol' Houston wrestling days when Big Humphrey was a prominent feature in Houston.

Another fascinating grappler who made his debut that year was Dr. Lee Grable. Dr. Grable was a gifted man--a wrestler, scholar and hypnotist! He not only wrestled, but gave demonstrations of his ability to hypnotize wrestling fans in the ring. Fans got their money's worth with Dr. Grable.

This was also the year that the Swedish Angel, billed as "wrestling's answer to Dr. Frankenstein" took on Big Humphrey in a match that fans talked about for months.

Purdue star Ray Gunkel made his debut on April 27, 1951. Gunkel entered the professional ranks with an outstanding amateur background, including a win over Verne Gagne. He went on to have a great career in professional wrestling, as a wrestler and later as a wrestling promoter in the Atlanta booking office.

Another interesting highlight of the 1951 season occurred when former World Heavyweight Boxing Champion Max Baer refereed at Houston Wrestling. Movie buffs will remember that it was Max Baer who James Braddock (played by Russell Crowe) beat for the World Title in the movie *Cinderella Man*. Baer also destroyed Primo Carnera in the boxing ring, ending the Argentinean Giant's boxing career.

Carnera was literally dumped on the street by boxing promoters, but a group of wrestling promoters cared enough to train the battered and broken-down athlete and teach him how to wrestle. Primo Carnera was able to make enough money to return to Argentina. He later brought his parents and family to America and lived on the west coast. Carnera's story would not be the first or only time that wrestling promoters came to the rescue of discarded boxers.

The year also saw Houston Wrestling make history for promoting the first Negro girl wrestling match in 1951. Morris Sigel was a leader in pushing for equality in sports, and there are many more examples of Houston Wrestling being a pioneer in this area.

Houston wrestling continued to be a strong proponent of tag team action, an innovation conceived in the Houston Wrestling office by Sigel and matchmaker Frank Burke. The fifties saw numerous tag teams battle for the Texas Tag Team Championship belts. There were numerous brother combinations, such as the Guzman brothers, Romero brothers, Tolos brothers, and the Zaharias brothers.

The four Zaharias brothers hailed from Cripple Creek, Colorado, and were known for their rugged style. They were made famous by one of the most gifted female athletes of the 21st century, Babe Didrikson. She was born in Port Arthur, Texas, and married George Zaharias. The wedding created problems for George's younger brother, “Babe” Zaharias, since there was now a second “Babe” Zaharias. The male ”Babe” invested a tremendous amount of time making sure that announcers and sportswriters did not confuse him with his new sister-in-law. He often became frustrated and emotional because of the situation, which may be why he was also known as Crybaby Zaharias.

Along with tag team wrestling, another strong characteristic of Houston Wrestling was the constant stream of great Mexican wrestlers hailing from both sides of the border. Houston was a great wrestling town for international stars who wanted an opportunity to show American wrestling fans that they were worthy of their respect.

Other famous stars who debuted in 1951were Handsome Johnny Barend, Bob Geigel (who became a wrestling promoter in Kansas City), Bob Orton Sr., Donn Lewin (brother-in-law to Danny McShane), future World Champion Pat O’Conner, Ruffy Silverstein, future promoter Jack Curtis, Art Nelson, Pat Fraley, Karol Krauser, Ivan Kalmikoff, Han Schnable, Fred Atkins and the Mighty Atlas.

1952 began with a controversy, as Duke Keomuka was named Texas Heavyweight Champion. This controversial judo expert invented the dangerous “stomach claw,” and teamed with fellow Japanese star Mr. Moto to capture the Texas Tag Team Championship belts. The memory of World War II and Pearl Harbor was still on the mind of wrestling fans who desperately wanted the titles back in the hands of Americans. Most of the

early action of the year was centered on one tag team after another trying to win the precious Texas titles from the hated Japanese villains.

As a little boy, I watched the sneaky Duke Keomuka. Every time the American wrestler turned his back to the Japanese star, barefoot Keomuka would rise on his tiptoes as Houston Wrestling fans screamed as loud as they could to warn the American that another “Pearl Harbor” was coming. Keomuka did not play up the Pearl Harbor and World War II gimmick. He didn't have to, since Houston Wrestling fans did it for him. Duke Keomuka was actually born in Hawaii and as American as the next wrestler, but he was a businessman and knew that he should let the fans determine his “ring character.” He played that role all the way to the bank.

Some of the outstanding stars that debuted at Houston Wrestling during 1952 were Gory Guerrero, Ricki Starr, and Dory Funk Sr. Guerrero was a great Mexican wrestler and the father of future stars Chavo, Hector, and Eddie Guerrero. Ricki Starr put the sports world on its tip toes as he combined his ballet skills and amateur wrestling ability to thrill wrestling fans with his flamboyant style. Dory Funk Sr., the rugged cowboy who rode in from the Texas panhandle, was the father of two future World Heavyweight Champions: Dory Funk Jr. and Terry Funk. The Funk family was a powerful force in Houston Wrestling during the seventies. It did not matter which Funk was World Champion or which Funk was in the ring, Houston Wrestling fans hated them *all*. On nights that the three Funks showed up at the Sam Houston Coliseum, it was outright bedlam.

Other new stars of 1952 included Bob McCune, The Great Scott, Mr. Moto, Angelo Savoldi, Bobby Weaver, Abdullah Bey, Kit Fox, Johnny Bence, George Pencheff, Andre Drapp (a muscular and very good-looking Frenchman who drove women wild), and another Japanese star, Kinji Shibuya.

The annual NWA convention continued to effectively govern NWA wrestling action and devised a unique national fundraiser. They declared that during the week of Thanksgiving, all NWA promoters had to donate a large portion of the gate to the Leader Dogs for the Blind organization in honor of their good friend and fellow promoter Leroy McGuirk, whom, as you might remember, had lost his eyesight.

1953 was another banner year for the Houston Wrestling promotion. The Houston Wrestling television show was becoming more powerful,

which meant bigger gates, bigger purses, and bigger stars scrambling to make their mark.

The Houston Wrestling Promotion continued to have perennial stars during the fifties, including World Champion Lou Thesz, Irish Danny McShane, Blackie Guzman, Duke Keomuka, Ray Gunkel, Rito Romero, Cyclone Anaya, Killer Kowalski, and even the most well-known wrestler at the time, Houstonian Gorgeous George. The “Toast of the Coast” had been a Houston Wrestling superstar since the mid-forties, but now he reached a level of recognition never before achieved. Notable people from the sports and entertainment world crowded around the “Gorgeous One.” He was a hot commodity, and deserves close examination as one of professional wrestling's most fascinating phenomena.

George Raymond Wagner was born on March 24, 1915, in Butte, Nebraska, but his family moved to Houston when George was seven years old. The future Hall of Famer grew up in a tough neighborhood around Milby High School. He quit school at age fourteen and worked to help support his family. According to Paul Boesch, George was a tough grappler who stood on the corner and challenged anybody to wrestle him. The winner's prize was twenty-five cents. It did not take long for Houston Wrestling promoter Morris Sigel to discover George and convinced the young man--who just turned seventeen--that he could make a lot more money in professional wrestling.

George weighed only 215 pounds and stood approximately five feet, nine inches tall--not exactly a huge man. However, he was tough and quite accomplished in the ring. George's greatest asset was not his size, but his natural showmanship. Not only was he flamboyant, he was overflowing with charisma and never passed up the opportunity to put on a show and make big money. One such occasion presented itself when he married his first wife, Betty Hansen, inside the ring. The ceremony was such a promotional hit that he took his new bride on tour, marrying her in arenas all over the country.

There are many stories about how George Wagner transformed into “Gorgeous George.” Some say the persona developed in the Northwest. Others say he produced it in Hollywood. A third version suggests George honed his money-making abilities in his early wrestling days in Texas, especially around Houston. The facts support all three tales, since the

character was not formed overnight. However, “Gorgeous George” *did* become an overnight sensation on national television.

When he wrestled in California, he was often in the company of top celebrities--entertainment giants like Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, and many others who were thrilled to be seen with the flamboyant superstar. Once Gorgeous George agreed to wrestle for a charity fundraiser in Los Angeles. His opponent? Burt Lancaster. Another movie icon held his wrestling robe and served as his honorary valet: Bob Hope. Some claim the event raised over a million dollars.

Gorgeous George's ring persona was difficult to match. As I mentioned, he entered the ring to the sound of “Pomp and Circumstance,” and was followed in the aisle by his loyal valet Jeffries. Where available, the Human Orchid had a royal purple spotlight. He insisted that Jeffries spray the aisle and ring with his favorite perfume, Chanel #5, since it smelled terrible! Later, George insisted on spraying the referee’s hands and his opponent whenever possible.

He let his thick blond hair down, pulling out his fourteen-karat hairpins. The hairpins were called “Georgie Pins,” and he threw them into the crowd as female wrestling fans scrambled for the valuable collector’s item. Many times this display resulted in vicious confrontations, and ended in a battle of fisticuffs. Sometimes men got involved so they could heroically present the pins to their wives or girlfriends. Since that part of the show was a personal injury lawyer’s dream, the Gorgeous One had to cease the ceremonial pin-toss.

“Georgie Pins” were so popular that politicians and celebrities begged Gorgeous George for them. He has been given much-deserved credit for shaping athletes and stars such as Muhammad Ali and the immortal James Brown. Both legends confessed they developed their professional personas by watching the “Gorgeous One.”

As you can imagine, Gorgeous George was perfect for television. His matches were televised nationwide. He became a household name, and more importantly, one of the most famous athletes in the world. This meant big bucks for wrestling promoters, television stations, television advertisers, and arenas around the country. Sources estimate George himself had annual earnings between $100,000 and $250,000. If these figures are correct, at his peak, Gorgeous George would have been the highest paid professional

athlete in the world. His television debut is still considered one of the top one hundred events in television history.

However, Gorgeous George's life reads much like a Shakespearian tragedy. He rose from a poor Houston neighborhood to the top of the entertainment and sports world, but he later tragically crashed back to earth. In 1962, doctors told Gorgeous George he could not wrestle any more due to his poor health. The star maintained a rigorous wrestling schedule, but partied with the rich and famous. He spent most of his money on an outlandish lifestyle, and lost the rest in bad investments. George suffered a major heart attack and died two days later, a pauper, on Christmas Eve, 1963, in Las Vegas. His children placed a plaque at his grave site that read, "Love to our Daddy Gorgeous George."

Sigel wasted little time getting the 1953 wrestling season off to a fast start. The first show of the year witnessed World Champion Lou Thesz successfully keeping his title against the number one contender, Killer Kowalski. Houston Wrestling fans were informed that Gorgeous George was returning to Houston, and warned of the upcoming debut of Wild Bull Curry!

Wild Bull Curry invaded Houston Wrestling on January 23, 1953, against star Billy Varga. The policeman-turned-professional-wrestler made quite a debut! Houston Wrestling fans watched in disbelief as the tough-fisted grappler battled Billy Varga, the referees, police, and any fan who was unfortunate enough to get in his way. He did not care who he punched or where he punched them--in the ring, under the ring, in the aisles, or all the way back to the dressing room. The future Houston Wrestling legend started the evening as "Bull Curry," but ended it as "Wild" Bull Curry. The nickname stayed with him for the rest of his life.

It did not take long for opportunistic Sigel to start a feud between Wild Bull Curry and Dangerous Danny McShane. As you could expect, the rivalry was bloody and uncontrollable. Normal wrestling rules and regulations didn't suffice, so Sigel created the Brass Knucks Trophy, another innovation of the Houston Wrestling promotion.

The Brass Knucks Trophy was meant to crown the wildest, toughest wrestler in the world. It was only fitting that Wild Bull Curry and Dangerous Danny McShane were the first brawlers to battle for the new and already respected trophy.

The headline of the Houston Wrestling program of March 6, 1953 read, “The Two Toughest Men in the World Battle it out for THE 'BRASS KNUCKS' TROPHY!” It went on to explain the terms for the historic event:

The match is for two out of three falls.

The referee cannot give a fall on disqualification to either man, although he can exert every effort to make the men stick as close to wrestling rules as possible.

If either man is hurt, or cut and bleeding badly, the referee cannot stop the match without the injured man's consent.

The winner receives the “Brass Knucks” trophy, conceived, designed and donated by promoter Morris Sigel, symbolizing the toughest wrestler in the world.

Wild Bull Curry came out victorious that night and earned recognition as the World’s Toughest Wrestler. However, this would not be the last time that the two grapplers battled for the title. The trophy exchanged hands on several occasions as the feud continued for years.

That rivalry wasn't the only hot item at Houston Wrestling in 1953. The Houston Wrestling television show was sizzling, and announcer Paul Boesch became a huge celebrity. He was so popular that a political party tried to convince him to run for mayor, governor, and even United States senator! Levits Jewelers, who sponsored the show, designed a “Paul Boesch” watch, trying to capitalize on the show's popularity. Another television sponsor, Mosk’s clothing store, marketed Paul Boesch sports shirts, only $ 4.95 while supplies lasted. Radio station KPRC produced several shows hosted by Paul Boesch. However, the best example of the Houston Wrestling television show's clout was when loser Duke Keomuka had to wheel winner Wild Bull Curry in a wheelbarrow down Main Street in Houston. Over twenty thousand fans turned out to witness the event.

But if the television show was hot, the action in the ring was hotter. One special event was the debut of a handsome athlete from Corpus Christi: Jack Adkisson. He was a football star at Southern Methodist University and was drafted by the Dallas Texans to play professional football. Like so many other football stars, he saw the opportunity to make more money in professional wrestling. This was especially true when Adkisson capitalized on his German heritage years later and became Fritz Von Erich, the man with the Iron Claw!

Other stars of Houston Wrestling that year were Gypsy Joe, Jack O'Reilly, Al Costello, Alo LeiLani, Ted Christy, Ray Stern, Bobby Lane, Lord Carlton, Eddie Gossett, Jean Baillargeon, Aldo Bogni, Bud Curtis, Chris Tolos, Johnny Kostas, Dutch Hefner, Juan Humberto, Johnny James, Jim Wright, Roger McKay, Spider Al Galento, Kurt the Prussian, Kay Bell, Luis Martinez, Chico Casasola, Stu Gibson, Pablo Romero, and Ray Stevens.

Sigel was very good about starting a new year with a spectacular event or the debut of a rising star. 1954 was no exception. Houston Wrestling witnessed the emergence of Samoan Prince Ulu Tele Maivia. Prince Maivia was first in a long list of wrestling superstars from a famous Samoan family that later introduced Peter Maivia, Rocky Johnson, and Duane Johnson, better known as "The Rock."

Dick Hutton, a protégé of Ed "Strangler" Lewis who would later become World Heavyweight Champion, invaded the Houston mat wars during that period. Mike Dibiase, a great wrestler and father of future superstar Ted Dibiase, also came to Houston that year. Tragically, Dibiase later died from injuries sustained in the wrestling ring. Angelo Poffo, another name on this impressive list, made it into *Ripley's Believe It or Not* by doing 6,033 consecutive sit-ups. Joe Blanchard is also notable, as he became the Texas Heavyweight champion, and was the father of superstar Tully Blanchard. Tosh Togo was a colorful Japanese star who established his reputation in professional wrestling and the movies, playing the villain Odd Job in the classic James Bond movie *Goldfinger*.

One of the most interesting matches of the year took place on September 17, 1954, when Joe Blanchard faced Jack Adkisson. While that night they battled in the Houston Wrestling ring, years later they did battle in a vicious promotional war!

Other stars making their first appearance that year were Jack "Sockeye" McDonald, Sugi Sito, Count Rossi (manager of Chris and John Tolos), Larry Chene, Joe Scarpello, Ilio Di Paulo, George Drake, Roy Shires, Joe "Killer" Christy, Polo Torres, Billy Darnell, and The Sheik of Araby.

In the Houston Wrestling promotional office, matchmaker Frank Burke was playing a more visible role by doing an excellent job, and also because Morris Sigel was facing medical issues. The Houston Wrestling

promotion continued to be a family business, since Burke was related to Sigel.

As 1955 unfolded, Houston Wrestling fans enjoyed bouts between many of the perennial stars of previous years in both single and tag team action. The year involved numerous tag team showdowns featuring top Japanese stars Duke Keomuka and Mr. Moto against a parade of popular Mexican stars, including a young wrestler by the name of Pepper Gomez.

Gomez made his debut on April 29, 1955, after months of publicity that left Houston Wrestling fans eager to see his performance. Pepper had great credentials and, more importantly, he was managed and trained by Blackie Guzman. Fans were not disappointed, as Gomez was slated in the main event against Duke Keomuka. He beat the established “heel,” much to the shock and delight of the fans.

Gomez was the number one star in 1955, as he quickly went on to win the Texas Heavyweight Championship and had several shots at World Heavyweight Champion, Lou Thesz. Gomez also developed his own version of the “stomach claw,” which made his rivalry against Duke Keomuka a fierce one all year long.

Houston Wrestling fans also saw the arrival of Leo Nomellini, who was the talk of the wrestling world since he seemed to be following in the footsteps of legendary Bronko Nagurski. Nomellini was a football star at University of Minnesota, just like Nagurski, and went on to play professional football with the San Francisco 49’ers. When he entered the wrestling mat wars, he pulled a big upset over World Heavyweight Champion, Lou Thesz. However, the historic victory was by disqualification, so Thesz remained the World Heavyweight Champion. There were numerous return matches all across the nation and even in Houston, but Thesz proved over and over again that he was the rightful World Heavyweight Champion.

Gentleman Ed Frances won the World Junior Heavyweight Title and defended the belt in Houston on several occasions. Frances later became a wrestling promoter in Hawaii and brought his two sons into the business. His oldest boy, Russ Frances, became a favorite in Hawaii and on the west coast. He also played professional football for the San Francisco 49’ers, where he was an All-Pro tight end and one of Hall of Famer quarterback Joe Montana’s favorite receivers.

Hard-Boiled Haggerty invaded the Houston Wrestling with his own gimmick. He challenged whoever he met with a harsh, “Want to fight?” His publicity photos featured Haggerty mixing it up with boxing legends Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano. Fans did not like him, but they respected his toughness.

Maurice Vachon, better known as Mad Dog Vachon, also saw action for the first time in the Houston ring that year. So did Tonina, a Mexican wrestling and movie star who made a great impression with the Mexican wrestling fans. He was one of the first in a line of Mexican wrestling and movie stars who gained fame in the Houston Wrestling ring, a list that also included El Santo and Mil Mascaras.

Other interesting combatants that season were men like Joe (Not the Senator) McCarthy. Recall that since these were the fifties, the Joe McCarthy Red Scare hearings were taking place in the nation's capital. The wrestler made sure his publicity photos and press releases included the much needed disclaimer. Every time his name was in print, “(Not the Senator)” was included in parenthesis. Houston Wrestling fans also watched the debut of Jack Laskin; billed as the greatest Jewish wrestler in the country.

Other Houston debuts that year included Rocky Colombo, strongman Tony Baillargeon, Don Eagle, Billy Two Rivers, Jimmy Carter (No relation to the future President), six-foot eight-inch Tarzan Mike, Hombre Montana, beautiful Renato El Hermoso, Leo Garibaldi, Tony Martin, Raul Zapada, Rey Urbano, Johnny Rougeau, Pierre La Salle, Ronnie Etchison, Ray Piret, The Mongol, Wilbur Synder, Bozo Brown, Doug Donovan, Hurricane Hans Hermann, Tony Borne, and Jim Dobie.

In recent years, flamboyant billionaire Donald Trump has learned that he can make even more money with his colorful “firings” on his television show *The Apprentice*. The Houston Wrestling promotion has also had some very colorful “firings,” including one which holds a very special spot in the folklore of Houston Wrestling.

It started with the debut of Don Eagle, a popular wrestler managed by his father, War Eagle. Don made money wrestling in the ring, while War Eagle set up his teepee in the lobby and sold Indian merchandise, including souvenirs of his son Don. The problem was that he infringed on the rights of the local wrestling promoters, and even more troublesome, he infringed on the marketing rights of arena concessionaires.

Matchmaker Frank Burke, who was responsible for the booking office operations of the Houston Wrestling promotion, found himself surrounded by angry promoters and concessionaires from many wrestling towns in the Houston territory. They threatened lawsuits if Burke could not stop War Eagle's souvenir operations.

Frank Burke tried to reason with War Eagle several times and negotiate a solution, but War Eagle would not budge and continued to set up his teepee wherever his son was wrestling. Burke got into a shouting match with War Eagle in the Houston Wrestling dressing room one night, and according to Paul Boesch, Frank screamed, “You and your son are fired! Pack up your teepee and merchandise and get the hell out of here. I have got feathers coming out of my ass!” Trump that one, Donald!

In typical Sigel fashion, 1956 began with another event designed to wow the crowds, as he signed World Heavyweight Champion Lou Thesz to defend his title against the World Negro Champion Luther Lindsey. The World Titles of professional wrestling were still segregated in 1956, but with this historic match, Sigel again demonstrated that he was a pioneer in the area of equal rights. Lindsey was an outstanding athlete, billed as “The Joe Louis of Professional Wrestling.” Just as Louis help tear down the walls of prejudice in the boxing ring, Lindsey was determined to do the same in wrestling. He did not beat Thesz that night, but his performance conveyed a message to the wrestling world that change was coming.

Several Houston Wrestling debuts in 1956 featured future superstars. One highlighted Gene Kelly, a football and wrestling star who was six foot, five inches tall, and weighed over 270 pounds. Kelly later changed his last name to Kiniski and defeated Lou Thesz for the World Title.

Another notable event was the appearance of Dr. Jerry Graham, who would become one of wrestling’s most explosive stars. He was best known for his days in the old WWF, when some of his matches ended in riots.

Houston’s own Tiger Conway Sr. made his debut on September 21, 1956, upsetting “Tex” Grady for the Texas Heavyweight Negro title. For the next thirty years, Tiger Sr. was a favorite with Houstonians, both in the wrestling ring and outside the squared circle, because of his efforts to help the people of Houston. He often attended charitable events and made appearances at the veterans' hospital. Whenever there was a call to support others, he was there.

The Houston Wrestling program of March 23, 1956, headlined the news that Lou Thesz had been defeated, handicapped by a broken elbow, and the new World Champion was Whipper Billy Watson. This upset took place in the Maple Leaf Gardens before more than fifteen thousand wrestling fans. The special referee was Jack Dempsey.

Lou Thesz returned from his injury and defeated Whipper Watson on November 9, 1956, in St. Louis, Missouri. Thesz was also busy training his new protégé, Sam Steamboat, who hailed from Hawaii and made his Houston Wrestling debut that year.

Jim LaRock, a member of the 1952 United States Olympic wrestling team, was also featured in Houston. LaRock was a sensational scientific wrestler, and challenged anybody to step in the ring with him. It did not matter if the challenge was answered by someone in the dressing room or someone in the audience. In the wrestling program, Sigel offered $250 to anybody who could beat LaRock in a fifteen-minute match. Many fans tried, but nobody could beat LaRock. This was another example of Sigel's flair for showmanship. While these bouts against fans must have been exciting to watch, personal injury lawyers would likely discourage such promotions in these days of expensive lawsuits.

On September 21, 1956, fans also witnessed the most explosive brain-busting debut of the year, with masked Mexican Superstar, El Medico. His "brain buster" was a maneuver in which El Medico jumped high into the air, and viciously drove his elbow into the head of his opponent. Often the other wrestler was knocked unconscious. El Medico then caused a riotous scene by brain-busting television announcer Paul Boesch, and anyone else who got in his way. Wrestlers, referees, and some of Houston's finest had to contain the non-English speaking grappler, and since the event was televised, it had Houston wrestling fans in a tizzy all week long. I still remember the night El Medico used the "brain buster" on my father, who was working security. My brothers, friends, and I saw it on television, and stayed up just to feel the bump on my father's head when he came home.

The next Friday night, thousands of Houston Wrestling fans converged to see the masked Mexican Wildman in action. El Medico did not disappoint, and commenced to dominate the main event spot. While fans did not like him, they sure did fear him! Favorites like Pepper Gomez, Bull Curry, Danny McShane, Duke Keomuka, and others were ready to battle El Medico, who became a Houston Wrestling legend.

Many other stars also made their first appearances that year, including the Amazing Zuma, Ramon Torres, Nanjo Singh, Skull Murphy, Manuel Cortez, Alvero Velazco, Sammy Berg, Luigi Macera, Len Hughes, Bill Savage, George Drake, Jack Vansky, Ricky Waldo, Red Donovan (who came to join his brother Doug), Robin Hood, Suni War Cloud, Len Crosby, the Great Bolo, Herbie Freeman, and the Elephant Boy.

The first big Houston Wrestling story of 1957 featured El Medico and Pepper Gomez teaming up to win the Texas Tag Team championship belts. That news was trumped by their more explosive bust-up, a savage feud that turned wild and bloody. The rivalry set records for action in the ring, and sales at the box office. Pepper Gomez was a primary contender for the Texas Heavyweight Championship belt, and he was a top contender for the World Heavyweight Title held by Lou Thesz. Gomez and Thesz had several fantastic showdowns, yet Thesz barely escaped with his title each time. The rivalry became more explosive when Ed “Strangler” Lewis, longtime friend and manager of Thesz, switched from Thesz’s corner to Gomez’s corner. Wrestling fans were stunned, certain that Lewis' knowledge would help Gomez win the World Title. While that event did not occur, it led to Sigel and Houston Wrestling having a banner year.

This time was also marked by the entrance of a young Mexican star, Jose Lothario, on January 4, 1957. Lothario became quite popular, but did not remain in Houston due to prior commitments. He would return years later, and become one of Houston Wrestling’s all-time greats.

Fans were also introduced to several giants of professional wrestling, including six foot, six inch Don Leo Jonathan, who weighed 280 pounds, and Big Tex McKenzie, who was six feet nine inches tall and weighed 285 pounds. Don Leo Jonathan went on to win the Texas Heavyweight title and compete for the World Title against Thesz on several occasions. Country Boy Calhoun, who weighed over 552 pounds and hailed from Arkansas, was another huge grappler who came to Houston and later became the famous Haystacks Calhoun.

Other noteworthy debuts that year include high-flying Red Bastien, Ivan the Terrible (who won the Texas Heavyweight Championship on his debut), and Bill Melby, who not only won his scheduled match against Duke Keomuka on his first night of wrestling, but substituted for an injured Pepper Gomez and won the Texas Heavyweight Championship.

Nicky Bockwinkel, son of wresting star Warren Bockwinkel, made his debut on July 12, 1957, against Joe Blanchard. Bockwinkel would later dominate Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Association, holding the AWA World Championship belt on several occasions. As you may remember, Bockwinkel would go on to play a crucial role in the final chapters of the Houston Wrestling promotion.

Lenny "Bull" Montana first wrestled in Houston on November 1, 1957. He was six feet six inches tall, weighed 320 pounds,and became known for his role in Francis Ford Coppola's historic movie *The Godfather*. Montana played Luca Brasi, the hit man employed by Don Corleone. As the story goes, when Lenny had to act out the intense choking scene in which he was assassinated, he was able to do it in one take. This shocked Coppola, but Montana reminded the Oscar-winning director that he had been making his living as a professional wrestler for many years, so the skill came naturally to him. Lenny Montana made a great Luca Brasi!

Mexican sensation and legendary El Santo also came on the scene that year, and was already dominating the Mexican professional wrestling and movie business. When he came to Houston Wrestling, Mexican wrestling fans brought their entire families, including several generations.

El Santo made his debut on Sigel's biggest card of 1957, since the promoter was celebrating his 41st year in Houston Wrestling. The record-setting event took place in the Sam Houston Coliseum, which was also air conditioned, unlike the City Auditorium. That night Thesz defended his World Heavyweight Championship against El Medico, and the supporting card featured Johnny Valentine against Negro Heavyweight Champion Luther Lindsey, Pepper Gomez against Don Leo Jonathan, Nicky Bockwinkel against Duke Keomuka. To show his appreciation for the support Houston Wrestling fans had given him over forty years, Sigel lowered the ticket price to ninety cents, which drew a turn-away crowd of over eleven thousand.

The program of November 29, 1957, informed fans that Thesz had lost the World Heavyweight Championship to Dick Hutton in Toronto in front of a sell-out crowd of over ten thousand Canadian wrestling fans. Remember that Hutton was the young star that Ed "Strangler" Lewis, friend and manager of Thesz, trained for a career in professional wrestling. Even Thesz helped the promising Hutton when he was first breaking into the business. Some mat experts wonder if Hutton beat Thesz, or if Thesz

“handed” him the belt. Only Thesz would ever know for sure, and unfortunately the legend is gone.

Another interesting event that year occurred when Channel 13 tried to capitalize on the popularity of the Houston Wrestling television show by adding another wrestling show to their lineup, one that aired late Sunday afternoon. The new show featured the workouts of various wrestling stars, but did not last long. Fans didn't want to see fitness routines, they wanted to see action.

Other wrestlers who first stepped inside the Houston Wrestling ring that year included Judo Jack Terry, Thor Hagan Lee Henning, Bill Fletcher, Cuban star Chico Amaro, Tokyo Joe, Jim Blood, Bennie Matta, “Pet” Brown, Jim Hady, Fritz Von Ulm, Juan Garcia, Chet Wallick, Rip Rogers, Con Bruno, Ike Eakins, Reggie Parks, Czaya Nandor, Nikita Zolotoff, Paul of France, Marco Polo, Kurt Von Pappenheim, Doc Gallagher, Crusher Dugan, Johnny Walker, Danny O’Shocker, Gypsy Joe, Brother Frank Jares, and Billy King.

The headline of the Houston Wrestling program of January 3, 1958 read “New Faces Feature First Card of Year!” A record six new stars debuted that night. Promoter Morris Sigel and Matchmaker Frank Burke were reloading with a new slate of talent. Casey McShane, brother of Danny McShane, was one of the top stars. The McShane brothers were one more tag team added to an impressive list. Jesus Cardenas, another new Mexican wrestler, stood six feet five inches, and weighed over 325 pounds. Up to that time, he was the biggest Latin American wrestler to enter the Houston mat wars.

It did not take long for the hot feuds of 1957 to continue in the new year. One between Johnny Valentine and Bull Curry had endured for months, as both wrestlers delighted in calling each other “jackass” on the Houston Wrestling television show. Sigel shrewdly signed the two to a showdown, the loser of which would have to ride a jackass named Old Speedy around the ring. The quote of the year came from Irish Danny McShane, who exclaimed, “There will be three jackasses in the ring. The only trouble is that the donkey, Old Speedy, is the only one smart enough to realize that he is a jackass.” Bull Curry lost the match and suffered the resulting humiliation. Old Speedy refused to comment.

One of the premier showdowns that year was the return match for the World Heavyweight Title between new champion Dick Hutton and former

champion Lou Thesz. The special referee was boxing great Jersey Joe Walcott. Hutton barely held onto the belt, though fans knew it was only a matter of time before Thesz would win it back!

Houston Wrestling fans cheered and celebrated during the summer of 1958 when Pepper Gomez and El Medico reunited as a tag team. With their feud behind them, the two once again joined forces. Wrestling fans loved bad guys who repented and became good guys, and in this case the newly-christened “good guys” became one of the most popular tag teams in Houston Wrestling history. On August 22, they defeated Wild Bill Longson and Ike Eakins to win the World Tag Team Championship Trophy, cementing Houston Wrestling as one of the great tag team wrestling promotions in the country.

Dickie Steinborn, son of Milo Steinborn, a Houston Wrestling star during the thirties, made his debut in 1958 along with Cowboy Bob Ellis, the famous Kangaroo tag team of Al Costello and Roy Heffernan, and Paul Anderson, the strongest man in the world. Anderson earned that title by beating the Russian champion weightlifter in a major world weightlifting contest. At this time, the United States and Russia were battling each other in the Cold War, so an American beating a Russian on the world stage was big news!

As the 1958 wrestling season ended, the last feud to settle was between El Medico and Danny McShane. Both men insisted that their opponent was a dirty wrestler, so Sigel seized the moment and signed the two for a final showdown. The loser had to take a bath in the ring and leave town! McShane won and El Medico was sent back to Mexico, much to the disappointment of fans.

That year also saw the emergence of newcomers like Juan Diego, Tito Carreon, Jack Pesek, Pierre De Glane, Billy Edwards, Jewish mat star Jerry Gordet, Jan Madrid, Jack Terry, Aldo Venturi, Japanese star Kato, Houstonian Joe Pizzatola, Gentleman Gene Darval, Greek star Nick Londos, Indian star Chief Black Hawk, Crybaby Bob Corby, Rip Hawk, Swede Karl Karlsson, Jerry Woods, Russian grappler Sputnik, and Freddy Fraley.

The headlines of the Houston Wrestling program of January 16, 1959, announced the crowning of a new World Champion! Pat O’Connor had beaten Dick Hutton in St. Louis Missouri on January 9, 1959. This upset was the talk of the wrestling world and Houston Wrestling's dressing room,

as everyone wanted a match with the new World Heavyweight Champion from New Zealand.

Irish Danny McShane was chosen as the top contender, since he had World Championships for the three weight classes under the Heavyweight division. A victory would make him the only wrestler in history to hold the World Title in four weight divisions. While McShane was not victorious against O'Connor, his performance demonstrated to the professional wrestling world that he could battle any man in any division.

Mexican star Luis Hernandez made his Houston Wrestling debut on April 24, 1959. He was an instant hit, and within weeks was the new Texas Heavyweight Champion. Hernandez was very talented, but his primary contribution to the history of Houston Wrestling was that he became the stepfather of future Houston Wrestling great, Gino Hernandez.

Nick Kozak made his Houston Wrestling debut on June 19, 1959, and his brother Jerry, made his first appearance the following Friday night. The Kozak brothers were highly ranked as a tag team, and dreamed of winning the World Tag Team belts, which were often defended at Houston Wrestling.

Both Kozaks were accomplished individual wrestlers, and in his debut, Nick managed an upset over Danny McShane. Within weeks he was the Texas Heavyweight Champion, and had a bout with World Heavyweight Champion, Pat O’Connor. Nick did not win the World Title, but established himself as a superstar. Later he was also a valuable referee in the Houston Wrestling promotion.

Nick Kozak was one of the finest stars to step inside the Houston wrestling ring. He was a first-class wrestler, a first-class referee, and most importantly, a first-class friend to Houston Wrestling fans, Paul Boesch, and me. He made himself available for charitable events that helped people and Houston Wrestling, and deserves a sincere and heartfelt thank-you.

On Friday night, August 7, 1959, fans witnessed a match between Danny McShane and El Enfermero, who had been sent to Houston by his friend El Medico who wanted revenge against McShane. What made this showdown special was that the ring was encased by barbwire, so no one could interfere or leave the ring until a winner was declared. Sigel had anticipated a bloody battle and signed a special referee for that night: former World’s Heavyweight Boxing Champion James J. Braddock. Movie buffs know that Braddock's comeback story was the central plot of the

movie *Cinderella Man*, starring Russell Crowe. It is one of the greatest comeback stories in the history of sports. Braddock did not know the meaning of quitting, and legend Joe Louis claimed that Braddock was the toughest man he ever faced in the boxing ring. Sigel showed his true flair as a promoter that night, as he not only put the barbed wire around the ring to contain the two wild brawlers, but he signed Braddock, one of the toughest boxers of all time, to keep the battle under control. That night's crowd didn't disappoint Sigel.

Syracuse wrestling champ and football star Dick Beyer made his debut on December 18, 1959. He would later become one of professional wrestling's biggest stars when he changed his ring character. Who did he become? Keep reading to find out.

That year Jerry Kozak married Eda Mae Weiss of San Antonio, Texas, inside the Houston Wrestling ring. His brother Nick Kozak was the best man. It was the first time a wedding ceremony took place inside the ring, and the Houston Wrestling fans in attendance were special guests. Jerry wrestled before the wedding ceremony and won his match against Jack Laskin, then ran to the dressing room to shower and put on his tuxedo for the big event. His soon-to-be wife was a big wrestling fan, and did not start to get ready until she watched Kozak wrestle and win. You have got to love it! This could only happen in the wild and wacky world of professional wrestling.

Others who made their Houston Wrestling debut in 1959 were Bob Hess, Mario Galento, future wrestling promoter Nick Roberts, Andre Bollet, European champion Frances Vallois, The Great Antonio, El Lobo, Lester Welch, Yvon Roberre, Martino Angelo, Pancho Lopez, Mike and Ed Sharpe, Dick Dunn, Joey Maxim, Fuzzy Martin, Dino Bravo, Al Mills, Jean and Joe Corsica, Tony Barbetta, The Purple Flash, The Golden Giant, Billy Strong, Johnny Rebel, Angelo Martinelli, McKinley Pickins, Duke Scarbo, Nero, Alex Perez, Tito Kopa, Houstonian Bad Boy Hines, Jessie Alba, Charlie Garza, Pedro Godoy, Sordomudo Rodriquez, Tony Angelo, Jack Obrien and Ya Qui Bravo.

From Gorgeous George's hairpins to wedding rings in the wrestling ring, the fifties were indeed golden for Houston Wrestling.

THE STRUGGLING SIXTIES

The sixties were a challenging decade for society and professional wrestling. How promotions answered those challenges would determine which ones survived and which perished!

The most important concern of regional promotions was how to handle the powerful medium of television, which was changing the American lifestyle and the face of professional wrestling. Television in the fifties had made national celebrities out of Gorgeous George, Buddy Rogers, Antonio Rocca, Lou Thesz and others. However, that symbiotic relationship was short-lived. Television soon became a destructive force for the professional wrestling business.

Fans realized they no longer had to buy tickets and travel to the local arenas, but could have that same entertainment in their living rooms. Wrestling promotions had to adjust or perish.

Promoters experimented with strategies that would enable them to harness the power of television as a positive force. Some used studio wrestling television shows to promote live wrestling shows that they would not televise. Wrestling fans had to be in the arena if they wished to see important matches. Sigel televised opening matches, but not featured matches or main events. He also used television to air interviews designed to create interest and sell tickets! This new tactic employed television shows to “tease,” and live wrestling shows to “please.”

Professional wrestling television shows built the stars and developed story lines. During televised matches, announcers also promoted the next live show and gave ticket information. Television critics were sensitive to this type of promotion. Some stations canceled wrestling shows because they were concerned that wrestling programs were developing into

wrestling advertisements. If a wresting promoter lost his television show, he lost his promotion. This trend shocked the business.

The *Houston Wrestling show* came under the same potentially dangerous scrutiny. There was a critical gray area the Houston Wrestling promotion was careful to maintain. They promoted live shows as much as possible, but did not cross the infamous thin line that would cause television stations to consider the program a commercial. On several occasions throughout the thirty-nine years that Houston Wrestling was on the air, the promoter had to meet with the local television station and discuss this controversial issue.

Because wrestling television shows in the fifties were under pressure to produce great ratings, the sport changed so it could stay on the air. Viewers demanded characters like Gorgeous George, Buddy Rogers, and other showmen, as well as wild action. Promoters had to add showmanship and stage bizarre events, which produced higher ratings in the short term, but encouraged criticism from television critics and stations, resulting in some promoters losing their airtime.

Professional wrestling shows were also threatened by overexposure. Keeping action fresh was difficult. Fierce competition among promoters sometimes made the business its own worst enemy. Negotiating good financial agreements with television stations was challenging, especially when other promoters offered their shows for free. Worse, some promoters paid television stations for air time.

Although many promoters weathered the financial hit when they lost television revenue, some failed because they could not use shows to promote upcoming live events.

How was the Houston Wrestling promotion going to respond to these serious challenges? Morris Sigel approached the sixties with his characteristic determination, persistence, and phenomenal work ethic. He stuck to the basics of marketing: providing the right product at the right price at the right place and with the right promotion. That strategy guided Houston Wrestling promotion through changing times.

The sixties began with Pat O’ Connor, the World Heavyweight Champion, taking on all worthy opponents. The World Tag Team Champions were Houston Wrestling’s own Pepper Gomez and Cyclone Anaya, which was good news for Sigel, who made money pitting the World Champions against villain teams from around the world.

Sigel also recruited two great athletes from the University of Houston during 1960. One was Adnon Kaisy, a great amateur wrestler who represented his country of Iraq in the Olympics. He was eager for an opportunity to parlay his skills into a lucrative professional career. The second star was Hogan Wharton, an All-American football player at the University of Houston who had received plenty of attention from the Houston media. While making money at Houston Wrestling, Wharton also played professional football with the Houston Oilers, a team in the new American Football League. The combination had worked for Bronko Nagurski and Joe Savoldi, and would also lay out for future stars like “Big Cat” Ernie Ladd and Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel.

That year also heralded the debut of “The World’s Ugliest Woman.” The Lady Angel billed herself with that title so she could sell more tickets and make money. It was not a title anyone dared to use without her permission. She was not terribly ugly; however, neither was she exactly Marilyn Monroe. There was also the “Loser Painted Yellow” match featuring a showdown between Joe Pizza and Nick Kozak. Kozak won and Pizza was painted yellow, much to the delight of the Houston Wrestling fans.

One of the biggest stories of the year was the debut of Torbellino Blanco, “The White Tornado.” Sigel brought Torbellino Blanco to Houston Wrestling hoping to fill the void left by El Medico. Torbellino Blanco wore the same white mask and white wrestling tights as El Medico, and his wrestling style was similar. Sigel gave Torbellino Blanco a huge promotional push, including a debut against El Medico's archrival, Irish Danny McShane. Blanco defeated McShane, beat Wild Bull Curry, won the World Tag Team Championship with partner Pepper Gomez, won the Texas Heavyweight Championship, and received the public endorsement of El Medico’s friend Blackie Guzman. El Medico also sent his endorsement. Sigel's determination was in part due to something Houston Wrestling fans did not know at the time: their beloved El Medico was in Mexico dying of stomach cancer.

The passing of El Medico was reported in the Houston Wrestling program of Friday, June 24, 1960. Fans were shocked and saddened, and so was I. El Medico was my first wrestling idol. In fact, I still have a small El Medico mask that he had given me when I was five years old. That was over fifty years ago, and the custom-made mask is still one of my most

cherished possessions. It is with sadness that I pay tribute to him in this story. He was a wrestling legend and a very special human being.

As I write, I remember another emotional event that took place in the Houston Wrestling ticket office nearly thirty years ago. I was alone there when suddenly the front door opened and an elderly Mexican woman stepped in. She quietly looked around, then shuffled across the office until she came to the picture of El Medico that Paul Boesch and I had hung on the wall. With tears running down her face, the lady kissed her fingers and put them on his picture. The young Mexican man with her turned to me and said in broken English, “El Medico was her son.” The grieving mother closed her eyes and started to pray while she touched El Medico’s picture. When she finished, she wiped her eyes and, without speaking, gave me a warm and very touching glance. Then she turned and shuffled towards the door. She knew we had a special bond because of her son. Her glance could speak volumes without a single word being uttered.

Despite Sigel’s efforts, no one was able to replace El Medico. However, Torbellino Blanco's talent, combined with Sigel’s promotions, established Blanco as a star. He went on to face Pat O’Connor for the World Heavyweight Title in front of a sold-out crowd of over ten thousand fans in the Sam Houston Coliseum on Friday, April 22, 1960.

That year included the return of Ricki Starr, a huge sensation on the nationally-televised *Jack Paar Show.* Starr was a professional wrestler and professional ballet dancer, and was managed by the famous promoter Jack Pfefer. Pfefer was a colorful and controversial person, responsible for giving several stars their professional wrestling debut (including Paul Boesch).

Captain Lou Albano made his Houston Wrestling debut as a special referee, then later as a wrestler. Albano was a professional football official, as well. This is the Lou Albano who would later play a major role in the so-called “marriage” between the WWE and MTV in the early eighties. This union drastically changed the WWE as Vince McMahon started his conquest of the professional wrestling world.

World Negro Heavyweight Champion Dory Dixon from Jamaica made his United States debut on Friday December 2, 1960, while Whiskers Savage made his final appearance on Friday December 9, 1960. Also, Sigel moved Houston Wrestling events from Friday to Saturday nights during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. Additionally, Houston Wrestling opened up

its own ticket office, advertised as “Sigel’s Wrestling Ticket Office,” at 707 Texas Avenue, across the street from the City Auditorium, on Tuesday, October 11, 1960.

Ciclon Negro, “The Black Cyclone,” made his debut in 1960 along with the riotous Sputnik Monroe. Other debuts included Guy LaRose, Rip Hawk, Brute Bernard, Lumberjack Tony Borne, Don Kent, El Gladiator, Mr. Kleen, Paul Vachon, Billy Parks, and Nelson Royal, who would eventually win the World Junior Heavyweight Title.

Attempting to jump-start the upcoming 1961 season, Sigel promoted a “Parade of Champions” card at the Sam Houston Coliseum on Friday, January 20, 1961. The star-studded card had Dory Dixon, the Jamaican sensation, going for the World Heavyweight Title against Pat O’Connor. World Junior Heavyweight Champion Danny Hodge, billed as the greatest athlete to come out of Oklahoma, risked his title against Jerry Kozak. The card also featured a battle for the Texas Heavyweight Title between Ciclon Negro and Don “The Bruiser” Manoukian, the outstanding offensive guard for the American Football League’s Oakland Raiders. There was also a battle for the Texas Tag Team Belts between the Monroe Brothers, Sputnik and Jet, who were pitted against Pepper Gomez and Hogan Wharton. Even the opening match was a title bout as Brass Knucks Champion Wild Bull Curry defended his trophy against Tony Borne.

Later that year, in the first “Russian Roulette” six-man tag war, Pepper Gomez, Ciclon Negro, and Dory Dixon took on Don “The Bruiser” Manoukian, Tony Borne, and Sputnik Monroe. Other special events of the year featured a showdown between Dory Dixon and Irish Danny McShane, which took place behind a barbed wire fence while the referee had to remain sitting on the ring post. There was also a special St. Patrick’s Day battle between Wild Bull Curry and Irish Danny McShane in which the loser was painted green by the winner. The luck of the Irish was with McShane that night, much to the disappointment of fans.

The Houston Wrestling program of July 7, 1961, announced that professional wrestling had a new World Heavyweight Champion, as “Nature Boy” Buddy Rogers pulled off a stunning upset of Pat O’Connor in front of forty-two thousand wrestling fans in Chicago on June 30th.

European champion Eduardo Castillo also debuted in 1961, determined to return the World Heavyweight Title back to Europe, where it had not been since Frank Gotch defeated the German Hackenschmidt in

1905. Another interesting European debut was Eric Rommel, a direct descendant of World War II's infamous German general Rommel, better known as the "Desert Fox." The handsome German was well-received by Houston fans. It is amazing how time can heal the pains of war.

Other debuts that year featured Shag Thomas, a football star at Ohio State and for the Green Bay Packers, the World Tag Team Champions Jim and Jack Dalton, Sheik Abdullah, Angelo Poffo and his controversial manager Bronko Lubich, Pacific Northwest champion Pepe Gonzalez, German grappler Waldo Von Erich, and the Mighty Yankees tag team. The Houston Wrestling program made sure to inform all of Houston that they were born north of the Mason-Dixon line, since boasting that you were a Yankee still constituted fighting words.

Chinese star Ham Lee was another newcomer that year, along with Treacherous Phillips, Jolly Charley the wrestling hobo, Tony Martin, Bobby Nichols, Ricky Cortez, Prince Meretana from New Zealand, Gene Murphy, Thor Hagen, Manuel Rocca, George Scott, Kojima Saito of Japan, 475-pound Haystacks Muldoon, Karl Von Schober, Johnny Kostas, The Russian Angel, and La Pantera.

Since 1961 had been a fantastic year, Sigel had plenty of talent to start the 1962 wrestling season.

Ramon and Alberto Torres arrived to join the brother tag team combinations like the Kozaks and Daltons.

The Houston Wrestling promotion also staged the first ten-man posse of wrestlers surrounding the ring while Wild Bull Curry and Jack Dalton battled for the Brass Knucks Trophy. The posse was allegedly supposed to keep both men in the ring so fans would be protected, but its real purpose was to sell more tickets.

Sailor Art Thomas was quite literally one of the biggest stories that year. He was a huge wrestler who had set box office records throughout the north and quickly won the Texas Heavyweight Championship. His impressive record of wins propelled him to the number one challenger position for the World Heavyweight Title. When Sigel signed the showdown between Sailor Art Thomas and Buddy Rogers, Houston Wrestling fans were ecstatic. While the two wrestlers had some classic showdowns during 1962, when the year ended Buddy Rogers was still the World Heavyweight Champion.

The Houston Wrestling program also informed fans that station KTRH would no longer be broadcasting wrestling action that happened after the Houston Wrestling television show went off the air for the evening. However, radio stations KCOH and KIKK continued to feature interviews and updates on what was happening at Houston Wrestling. These broadcasts were crucial to the Houston Wrestling promotion since they kept fans informed and were great media tools to create interest and sell tickets.

The “Miss Texas Wrestling” contest was also featured during 1962, and was a big favorite with fans. What made this beauty contest special was that a sixteen-year-old girl from Houston’s Reagan High School won it. Miss Sammi Williamson was not only a beautiful young lady, she also was a principal dancer with the Great Houston Civic Ballet Company, and loved professional wrestling. Her favorite wrestler was Wild Bull Curry!

Noted wrestling debuts of 1962 included John Paul Henning, Tarzan Tyler, Portuguese champion Carlos Rocha, the Big Alaskan, the Mummy, and El Medico II who not only wore the same kind of mask and wrestling tights as El Medico, but had the same “brain buster” finishing move. Sigel was still determined to recapture the magic of the first El Medico.

On November 30th the wrestling program announced that Killer Kowalski was the new World Heavyweight Champion, since he had broken Buddy Rogers’ ankle and upset the colorful and controversial champion in Montreal. Remember that Kowalski had been a star at Houston Wrestling, and had come close to winning the World Championship. He had established a reputation of being one of the most dangerous wrestlers in the business after he tore off Yukon Eric's ear during a match. He also broke Eduard Carpentier's leg during a fierce struggle.

Other wrestlers who made their Houston Wrestling debut in 1962 included George McArthur, Mario Moreno, Nick Kilonis, Chico Casasola, Tony Angelo, The Mighty Bolo, Chief Kit Fox, Tony Napolitano, Lorenzo Parente, Taro Myaki of Japan, Gentleman Joe Tangaro, Irish Mike Clancy, Red McKim, Bengy Ramirez, Kenny Ackles, Pepper Martin, Oscar Salazar, Tuffy Truesdale, Ivan Zukoff, and the masked villain “The Bat.”

1963 opened with a raging debate on who exactly was the World Champion. Killer Kowalski claimed the World Championship, but Rogers had been trying to wrestle on a broken ankle. Rogers felt that the match should have been stopped, since Kowalski couldn't have beaten him without the broken ankle. Former World Champion Lou Thesz also claimed the

World Title, arguing that Rogers was avoiding him and he should have been in the ring with Rogers on that historic night in Montreal.

Sigel sprung into action, signing Killer Kowalski to defend his title against Thesz in Houston on February 1, 1963. Thesz defeated Kowalski and walked out of the Houston Wrestling ring as World Champion, which satisfied most critics but not Buddy Rogers. Thesz called himself the undisputed World Champion, which became the basis for one of the most personal feuds in the history of the business.

Another significant event occurred on March 22, 1963,with the appearance of "Big Cat" Ernie Ladd. One of the most impressive athletes to come out of Texas, Ladd stood six foot nine inches tall and weighed over 325 pounds. He was a superb professional football player and professional wrestler, blessed with outstanding athletic ability and agility, earning him the nickname "Big Cat." Ladd played for the San Diego Chargers but contacted wrestling promoters on the west coast. They convinced him he could earn a bigger paycheck as a wrestler. Ladd started training as a professional wrestler during the off-season, and quickly rose to the top after his debut.

Sigel immediately signed a showdown between Ladd and World Heavyweight Champion Lou Thesz. The wrestling world was abuzz. Would history repeat itself, echoing the time Bronko Nagurski upset Lou Thesz for the World Heavyweight Championship in 1939? Ernie Ladd was ready! Houston Wrestling fans were ready! The whole wrestling world was ready! The question was if World Heavyweight Champion Lou Thesz was ready!

Thesz barely escaped with his championship belt, but knew that, as Ladd gained experience, he would become a force to be reckoned with. Ladd spent the next few years winding up his football career and focusing more on professional wrestling. Not only did he become a superstar, he was a great friend to the Houston Wrestling promotion and to me as well. I had my first on-camera television opportunity because of Ernie Ladd. Ladd wanted to shoot a promotional tape for a big match in Atlanta, Georgia.

When Ladd asked to produce the promo tape using the Channel 39 remote facilities, Paul Boesch reached for his sports jacket. Ladd surprised everybody when he said he wanted me to be the announcer. Boesch was a big man—he stood over six foot two inches tall and weighed over 225 pounds. I stood only five feet eight inches tall and weighed 170 pounds. Ladd was a showman, and knew he would look much more impressive

standing next to me. I was caught by surprise, but knew a good opportunity when I saw it.

Together, Ernie Ladd and I went up on the television stage and I did the standard announcer's introduction. The great talker Ladd took over, and the promotional tape went very well. Boesch and the television director were so impressed with the contrast of my small body next to Ladd that they gave me new responsibilities with the Houston Wrestling television show. I found myself doing interviews with big stars and wrestlers who did not want to stand next to the larger Paul Boesch. The official Houston Wrestling photographer took a picture of my taping with Ladd, who completely towered over me. Ernie and I became close friends and business partners later in our careers. We co-promoted in Beaumont, Texas, with partners Junkyard Dog and Mid-South Wrestling.

The subject of Mid-South Wrestling brings up Cowboy Bill Watts' debut in the Houston mat wars. The Cowboy starred in football and wrestling at the University of Oklahoma, and was billed as the "Big Red O." Watts quickly won the Texas Heavyweight Championship, and later took over Mid-South Wrestling and built it into a premier wrestling organization in the eighties. Bill Watts and Mid-South Wrestling were major players in the evolutionary decade of the eighties, and changed professional wrestling forever.

Other important 1963 debuts included Maniac Mark Lewin, Danny McShane's brother-in-law and a future wrestling superstar, Dr. Bill Miller, Stan Stasiak, Pretty Pat Patterson, Manuel "Bull Ramos" from Jeff Davis High School, Sweet Daddy Siki, Alejandro Cruz from Mexico, Louie Tillet the champion of France, and box office sensation Bobo Brazil from South America.

I also want to make special mention of the debut of Nick "The Greek" Spillios on Friday, August 23, 1963. He was a teacher at Jones High School, but often wrestled at Houston Wrestling. Spillios watched the Houston Wrestling television show and grew up wanting to be a professional wrestler. A great athlete who excelled in the shot put and other track events, he never gave up his dream of wrestling. On the Houston Wrestling television show, he used his fame to help his students, and be a positive role model for them as well as other youngsters throughout the Bayou City. Nick was a very special person. Every wrestling town in America should have a

Nick Spillios—a guy who never made big money, but was there for the community.

Several top tag teams came to Houston in 1963, including Kurt and Karl Von Brauner from Germany, the Mysterious Medics from Mexico, Rip Hawk and Rock Hunter, and the Stanlee brothers—Bob and “Mr. America” Steve.

Sadly, 1963 was also the year the old City Auditorium was torn down. It had helped put Houston on the national entertainment map, served as the home of Houston Wrestling for over fifty-three years, and was the stage for many rising entertainers outside of professional wrestling. The historic building featured performances by a young Willie Nelson, Hank Williams, Babe Ruth and his New York Yankee teammates, and a singer by the name of Elvis Presley. Changing times required a new facility: the Jesse H. Jones Hall.

The Houston Wrestling Program of June 7, 1963, informed Houston Wrestling fans that:

STARTING FRIDAY JUNE 14TH and THEREAFTER HOUSTON WRESTLING WILL BE HELD AT THE SAM HOUSTON COLISEUM

That arena would serve as the home of Houston Wrestling for over twenty-six years.

Sigel started 1964 with the usual fanfare: a twelve-man single-elimination tournament with the winner promised a shot at World Heavyweight Champion Lou Thesz. These tournaments were a great way for a wrestling promoter to start new feuds and angles, and establish momentum for the coming year. Joe Blanchard won the tournament. On the night that Blanchard battled Thesz for the World Title, Sigel launched the next vicious villain from Japan: Tokyo Tom.

Tokyo Tom quickly beat Wild Bull Curry and would later defeat Joe Blanchard for the Texas Heavyweight Title, but he refused to accept the Texas Heavyweight belt--the ultimate insult to Texas wrestling fans. Sigel did not miss a trick! Tokyo Tom, who demanded to be called “Ichiban” (“number one” in Japanese), continued to plow through all competition, including a special tag team battle with Tarzan Tyler against Irish Danny McShane and Wild Bill Curry, who had been bitter rivals in the past. But even they could not stop the Orient Express.

Sigel also brought in favorites from the past, like Torbellino Blanco, as he worked to establish the Sam Houston Coliseum as the new home of Houston Wrestling. It was a gradual process of making Houston Wrestling fans comfortable in their “new home.”

Since the Sam Houston Coliseum hosted other events and shows, it was not always available for Friday night wrestling matches. On those nights when the Coliseum was booked, Sigel had to move the matches to the Fonde Recreation Center. That facility, despite being just a few blocks from the Coliseum, was difficult to get to, and an inferior building overall. That meant fans believed that the wrestling matches at the Recreation Center could not possibly be as good as the matches at the Sam Houston Coliseum. The Recreation Center had a capacity of only eighteen hundred fans, and it lacked adequate parking, restrooms, air conditioning, and dressing rooms. The dressing room only had one stand-up fan, and became

incredibly hot and crowded when packed with a dozen professional wrestlers, two referees, two ring assistants, and one frustrated Paul Boesch, who used the dressing room for his makeshift office as he ran the show. When the wrestlers showered in the two stalls adjacent to the dressing room, it quickly became a sauna, especially during the summer months when temperatures outside were in the nineties.

Why did Sigel promote wrestling matches in the Fonde Recreation Center if it was such an inferior building and caused the promoter to lose money? The answer was threefold. First, the Houston Wrestling promotion had a responsibility to televise a "live" weekly show. *Houston Wrestling* was technically not a "live television show" as it was taped and presented as a "live event." Second, Sigel believed that if wresting fans had a Friday night without Houston Wrestling, they might find something else to do and get out of the "Friday night habit." Finally, even though Recreation Center shows lost money, they made a contribution to the overall fixed costs of the Houston Wrestling promotion. The live shows in the Recreation Center were used much like a studio wrestling television show, motivating Houston Wrestling fans to get their tickets early for the big upcoming return to the Sam Houston Coliseum. This strategy was used for nearly twenty years and did not change until the eighties. (Then again, a lot of things changed in the eighties!)

1964 was a challenging year for Sigel as he brought in stars from around the world, including the Japanese star Oki Kantaro, Swede Hansen, The Black Orchid, the world's biggest rodeo cowboy, Dakota Mack (who would return to Houston as Sky High McKenzie years later), International Tag Team champions Kurt and Skull Von Stroheim, Gorgeous Gi-Gi who billed himself as the "Bird of Paradise," the "Clawman," the Wrecker, Big Bill Dromo, and the special debut of Freddie Curry, son of Wild Bull Curry.

Houston Wrestling also featured the debut of Port Arthur's own Paul Jones. Jones started off as a television cameraman at television station KPAC-Channel 4. While working for the television station, he caught "the professional wrestling bug" and became determined to become a wrestler. Nick Kozak trained Jones, who did well at Houston Wrestling and made a name for himself around the wrestling world. Other events that year included the return of Antonio Rocca for a special one-shot appearance, the

return of Luis Hernandez, and the debut of Killer Karl Kox, who took over the main spot with his dangerous “Skull Crusher.”

The Houston Wrestling promotion tried holding shows on Thursday and Saturday nights when the Sam Houston Coliseum was not available on Friday, but those experiments proved that Houston Wrestling fans wanted their matches on Friday night!

Houston Wrestling was also caught in the middle of a strange political chess game concerning the National Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Championship. Lou Thesz was the NWA World Champion. However, he avoided all challenges. Sigel, along with other NWA wrestling promoters, was determined to force Thesz into action. Some states began recognizing Jackie Fargo as their World Champion, in part due to pressure from Fargo’s manager, the controversial Jack Pfefer. Even Sigel, disenchanted with the non-responsive Thesz, decided to book Fargo. The problem was that Thesz had broken several ribs in a match in Detroit, and was stalling to give himself more time to heal before stepping in the ring. However, when word got to Thesz that even Sigel was booking self-proclaimed champion Fargo, he became enraged. Thesz issued the challenge to battle Fargo any time, any place, under any conditions. He was hotly determined to teach Pfefer and Fargo a lesson. When the pair heard Thesz was coming for them, they wisely packed their bags and retreated to New York. Pfefer and Fargo were not the first, nor would they be the last, individuals sent fleeing for safety by an enraged Lou Thesz.

Rounding out the list of 1964 newcomers were Pepe Gonzalez, Mark Starr, Pedro Patino, Oni Wiki Wiki, Indian Joe, Paco Villa, Beatniks Rick and Moe, Russian Nikita Mulkavich, Paul DeGalles, Antonio Posa, Cowboy Ron Reed, Arnold Steele, Frenchman Rocco Lamban, Eyota the Warrior from Livingston, Texas, and Bill Dromo.

As hard as he worked, Sigel had limited success establishing momentum until Friday, November 20, 1964. Fans witnessed the German invasion of Fritz Von Erich, the man with the dangerous “Iron Claw!” No longer was he the handsome young athlete Jack Adkisson from Corpus Christi.

Houston Wrestling fans will remember Von Erich’s explosive debut for many years. I was eleven years old, and that was my first official night as an employee of Houston Wrestling. I was the Assistant Television Director, and my job was to help my uncle, Paul Boesch, keep the live show

running smoothly. I had to run and get wrestlers for interviews, signal when to send in the next match, time live commercials with the sponsors, and anything else that allowed my uncle to broadcast without interruption.

The night began innocently enough with Fritz Von Erich, still in his business suit, examining the Houston Wrestling ring to determine if it met his standards. Sigel had been trying to land Von Erich for several weeks, and he had finally arrived. Since it was time to begin the next match, referee Marvin Jones entered the ring and politely asked Von Erich to leave. The German slapped his dangerous “Iron Claw” on the referee, whose screams of agony echoed throughout the Sam Houston Coliseum. Jones' head started to bleed from the intense pressure of the “Iron Claw,” as fans gasped. Von Erich finally released Jones, who collapsed in a bloody mess in the middle of the ring. Von Erich, still in his street clothes, stormed out of the ring. He'd made his point--no one told him what to do.

Paul Boesch hit my shoulder and shouted, “Go get him for an interview!”

Scared to death, I ran up the steps to the Coliseum dressing room and tapped Fritz Von Erich on his shoulder. He turned and shouted, “What the hell do you want!” My heart stopped. I froze. Somehow I was able to say one word: “Television.” Von Erich shoved me out of the way and stormed toward the television platform. He interrupted Paul Boesch and started a shouting match with my uncle while the live cameras were rolling.

Paul Boesch did not back down, and Von Erich slapped the “Iron Claw” on my uncle. There I was, eleven years old, watching in horror as my uncle screamed in pain. His head started to bleed. I was terrified. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my Aunt Eleonore crying for someone to help her husband. I couldn’t do anything, just remembered how my uncle told me at the beginning of the night that no matter what happened, I was “to stay out of it!”

Von Erich let go of my uncle, who collapsed on the platform with his head bleeding. The wrestler quickly exited the Coliseum as medics carried my uncle to the dressing room with my crying aunt by his side. The Sam Houston Coliseum was in chaos, and television fans at home were in shock! Houston Wrestling would never be the same, and Fritz Von Erich would become a major force inside and outside the wrestling ring.

Not only did that night mark the toughest $1.50 I made in my life, in some inexplicable way I became hooked on professional wrestling and

spent the next twenty-five years of my life eating, drinking, and living professional wrestling.

As I became more knowledgeable about the sport, I realized the debut had been designed to shock fans. That would have been helpful information at the time, preventing the months and months of nightmares my eleven-year-old self suffered. Even to this day, I often wonder why I did not require therapy. (Some of my close friends may argue that it's not too late.)

Fritz Von Erich rode that wave of momentum through 1965, dominating the main event spot in Houston Wrestling. He also made an impression on various Texas wrestling promotions, and eventually became the owner of the Dallas booking office. An intelligent businessman, his “invasion” established Von Erich as a dominating force in Texas Wrestling for the next twenty-five years!

Other international stars who appeared in Houston that year were Italy’s Vittorio Apollo, France's “Quasimoda.” the hunchback of Notre Dame, Canada’s Billy Red Lyons, Don McClarity (billed as wrestling’s answer to The Beatles), Claude Patterson, Mike O’Leary (who would return as Mike York, one of the members of the Alaskans tag team), and Russia’s Nikita Kalmikoff, who promised to “Bury all American wrestlers,” no doubt inspired by Nikita Kruschev’s vow to “Bury all Americans.”

Houston also saw the debut of Japanese martial arts star and future professional wrestling Hall of Famer Kanji Inoki. Inoki became one of the most respected athletes in Japanese sports, dominating professional wrestling. He also became one of the biggest promoters in the Japanese wrestling business. There was also the debut of local boy Ken Hollis, who, like Gorgeous George, graduated from Milby High School. Hollis was also a well-known student at Sam Houston State Teachers College in Huntsville.

Sigel continued to pit new talent against established stars--Bull Curry, Danny McShane, Ernie Ladd, Mark Lewin, Duke Keomuka, Ciclon Negro, Pepper Gomez, and of course then-current World Champion Lou Thesz. He also maintained Houston as a top tag-team town, hosting The Executioners, The Hillbillies, The Corsica Brothers, The Wrestling Rams (Don Chuy and Joe Carollo, who played professional football for the National Football League's Los Angeles Rams), and The Dalton Boys (Jack and Jim). Late in the year, Fritz Von Erich teamed with Killer Karl Kox to win the World Tag Team Titles.

The most important debut of the year featured the “Intelligent and Sensational” Destroyer, billed as the toughest masked man in professional wrestling, and the current champion of the Pacific Coast. Because of his reputation, the Destroyer had a debut booking to battle Lou Thesz for the World Heavyweight Title. Talk about a tremendous push from a promoter! The Destroyer, who had wrestled in Houston under his real name Dick Beyer, was an outstanding athlete. Sigel catapulted him into mat feuds with a rivalry between him and Fritz Von Erich. The Destroyer also battled Torbellino Blanco in a loser-takes-his-mask-off showdown. The Destroyer won and Torbellino Blanco reluctantly removed his mask, much to the disappointment of Houston Wrestling fans.

In addition to the wrestlers already mentioned, other newcomers included Mike Harmon of Sudan, Joe Turco of Sicily, Apache Pete, Cyclone Soto, Dutch Savage, Johnny Kace, Alvera Velasco, K.O. Ken Yates, The Blue Avenger from Mexico, The Great Dane, Victor Rivera “Mr. Puerto Rico,” Leon Levinski, Don Duffy, Bruce Kirk, The Golden Terror, “Ox” Anderson, and The Mongol.

On the promotional front, Sigel was still trying to make fans comfortable with the Sam Houston Coliseum and make his shows in the Fonde Recreation Center more profitable. He promoted one show at the Recreation Center for which every ticket was one dollar. The Recreation Center sold out that night, but fans would not pay regular ticket prices there. At other events, the box office took a financial hit.

Sigel also had a special promotion at the Sam Houston Coliseum on April 9, 1965, as tickets were sold two-for-a-dollar. Over ten thousand wrestling fans packed the Coliseum on the night that the eighth wonder of the world, the Astrodome, had its grand opening. There was a citywide effort to show the sports world that Houston was indeed a force to be reckoned with. (But recall that Sigel's real money was in concessions, not at the box office, so a full house worked to his benefit.)

Houston Wrestling was also trying to find its niche in the local television market. It was aired on Channel 13, which was an ABC national affiliate, so the local station did not have much programming flexibility. The Houston Wrestling program was bounced back to Thursday nights, then to midnight on Friday nights, then back to its usual time of 10:30 on Friday nights. The time slot changes hurt ratings and gave a false impression of instability to the well-entrenched wrestling promotion.

While Fritz Von Erich continued to wreak havoc on the Houston Wrestling scene, Sigel signed Dory Funk Jr. of the famous Funk Family to come to Houston. He was the oldest son of Dory Funk Sr., one of the toughest men to ever wear a pair of wrestling tights. His friends knew Dory Jr. as "Dunk," and he was raised learning how to wrestle and walk at the same time. Dory Sr. was a great trainer not only for Dory Jr., but also for his other son, Terry. Both went on to win the National Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Championship.

Speaking of World Championships, the Houston Wrestling program of January 14, 1966, informed fans that Gene Kiniski had defeated Lou Thesz for the title on Friday, January 7th, in St. Louis, Missouri. They battled before more than twelve thousand stunned fans. Kiniski was a champion amateur wrestler in Canada. He then moved to Arizona to become a wrestling champion and star football player. He was the first Canadian to win the World Title since the days of Whipper Watson. Fans were anxious to see the new World Champion, and Sigel was even more anxious to bring him to Houston. Everyone wanted to see the man who beat Lou Thesz!

Joining the ranks of main event talent at Houston Wrestling that year was Pedro Morales, "The Ox," who would return years later as Ox Baker. Other newcomers included Crazy Luke Graham, Nasty Nick Adams (who would come back years later as the trainer for wrestling bears), Southern Champion Buddy Fuller, Bearcat Wright, Japan's Kinji Shibuya, Bulldog Dan Plechas, and Gay Gary Hart and his tag team of Al Costello and Karl Von Brauner. There was also the debut of Jack Daniels from Tennessee, who went to great lengths to convince fans he was rough and rugged, not smooth and mellow like the other Jack Daniels from Lynchburg, Tennessee. Other debuts included Ripper Leone, Tim Colt, Indian Joe, Jerry Miller, Pepe Gomez, Roger Kirby, Lorenzo Parente, 300-pound Zebra the Kid, Jim Starr, Danny Little Bear, Mario Rios, Ronnie Hill, El Hurricane, and Beatnik Bob Hamby.

Ernie Ladd left the wrestling ring in July to join the Houston Oilers as they prepared for the upcoming football season. Ladd was a major box office attraction and knew his football days were coming to an end, so he wanted to focus entirely on professional wrestling after the football season. That year, Benjy Ramirez also decided to take off his "Mummy" wrestling outfit so he could wrestle under his real name. His costume weighed over

thirty pounds, so it must have been extremely difficult for him to wrestle while wearing it.

Fans were also informed of the sad news that Ed “Strangler” Lewis had died. The Houston Wrestling program mentioned the four million dollars Lewis had made, most of it spent on charitable causes. While Lewis had been one of the toughest men to walk the face of the earth, he spent his last twenty years as a man of God, preaching to thousands and converting them to Christianity. Lewis was a true champion inside and outside the wrestling ring, a legend that will never be forgotten.

That sad occurrence was followed by other tragedies, as John “Paul” Henning, who was making appearances in the Houston ring, was in a terrible automobile accident. He would never be able to wrestle again. Chris Zaharias also passed away, joining his brother Babe, who had died years earlier. These times were a sobering reminder that wrestlers are indeed human. Fans, who watched their stars in action year after year, felt like their favorites were friends. It is always sad to know that those friends will not be back.

The most significant event for Houston Wrestling in 1966 was the agreement to move the television show from Channel 13 to the new Channel 39. It was not uncommon for local wrestling promotions to switch from the network affiliates to the independent stations sprouting up across the country. The national affiliates found it difficult to slot local wrestling shows in decent air times because their schedules were dominated by nationally-syndicated programs. Also, independent stations needed programming and welcomed the chance to be involved in local promotions, since television regulations encouraged independents to air local shows. It was a great match for both parties--wrestling promotions needed good air times to market their product, and independent stations needed wrestling to help grow their revenue.

1967. It was early in the morning and I was getting dressed, enjoying the fact that there was no school because it was still the Christmas holiday. I turned on the radio and heard the announcement: “Long time Houston Wrestling Promoter Morris Sigel is dead.” My heart stopped and I got a sick feeling in my gut. I was only thirteen years old. I cried.

The Houston Wrestling program of January 6, 1967, said it best:

★ Wrestling Program ★

GULF ATHLETIC CLUB, Promoter — MRS. SHIRLEY CARRIGER, Assistant Promoter

No. 1092 — FRIDAY, JANUARY 6, 1967 — HOUSTON, TEXAS — PHONES: CA 2-2288-98 — PRICE: 20 CENTS

A TRIBUTE TO A GREAT PROMOTER...A FINE FRIEND...
MORRIS SIGEL LEFT A LIVING LEGACY FOR SPORTS FANS

MORRIS P. SIGEL
31 OCTOBER 1897 –
– 27 DECEMBER 1966

In the early morning hours of Tuesday, December 27, 1966, Morris Sigel died. Thus ended a gallant battle that had been going on since 1952 when he was stricken with his first heart attack.

Morris was not an athlete but hundreds of men of muscle, with sturdy physiques and battered faces, admit that his daily duel with death was waged with a courage they could not have displayed.

In spite of this handicap Morris Sigel maintained his promotional control of wrestling in Houston. The sport was not only his livelihood, it was his hobby and his very life. He came to the office every day, made decisions, contacts and friendships, he looked forward to each day behind his crowded desk.

Unlike most people in the sports world Morris was a quiet and unobtrusive man who went about his business in an easy, orderly manner. But he was also a man who could explode into colorful language and express himself in a way that made the air turn blue when the situation demanded it.

In spite of his small size he was ready to stand up to the biggest of men and voice his opinion when there was a controversy. He was for you or he was against you, there was no middle ground.

And he was just as quick to express friendship. Morris was fiercely loyal to those who were associated with him and prized loyalty in return as a fitting reward.

Morris had a deep sense of feeling for his fellow man and his generosity toward individuals and needy causes was constant. He made philantropy a part of his life although he would never have used such a big word to describe it. He was a "soft touch" in every wonderful sense of the word.

Most things about Morris Sigel are a matter of indisputable record: 50 years of sports promotion; the first wrestling license and the first boxing license in the State of Texas; commendations from the State legislature and from hundreds of organizations for his great help to people who needed it; innovations in the wrestling game that have become an enduring part of the sport and promotional pyrotechnics that have become a model for others to follow.

These are part of the living and indelible legend.

Yet, those of us who were privileged to know him well prefer to remember him as a friend whom we shall never forget.

It was a cold and windy day as they laid Morris Sigel to rest. At the gravesite, Mrs. Paul Boesch and my mother, Mrs. John Birkholz, huddled behind Ernie Ladd, trying to protect themselves from the chilling wind. But even the giant Ladd could not completely shield friends and family, nor could he block the chilling wind of uncertainty that gusted through the world of Houston Wrestling.

Morris Sigel had battled heart problems for many years so his death should not have been a surprise, but it was. Over his fifty years in the business, Sigel had demonstrated a toughness that fans, athletes, and fellow promoters respected. He survived numerous financial, controversial, personal, and health-related storms. Sigel was a great promoter, businessman, and philanthropist, but most importantly, he was a great man who touched millions of lives.

None of Sigel's family members wanted to promote Houston Wrestling, so the door of opportunity swung open for my uncle, Paul Boesch. Boesch purchased the Gulf Athletic Club Inc. from the Sigel family. He had been a popular announcer and symbol of Houston Wrestling for the past twenty years, and now he was its promoter. His life and career deserve a closer look.

PAUL BOESCH

Paul Boesch was born on October 2, 1912, in Brooklyn, New York to Max and Bridget Boesch. His parents had seven children: four boys and three girls. Their names were August, Charles, Joseph, Paul, Martha, Wilhelmina, and Margaret. After Paul's father Max passed away, his mother married John Birkholz. She changed her name to Delia Birkholz, and they had a son named John--my father. Although Paul Boesch and John Birkholz were really half-brothers, I never heard either one refer to each other in that manner. Paul was not only a big brother, but, since he was much older and my grandfather passed away when my father was seven, a father figure to Dad.

Soon after Paul's mother married John Birkholz Sr., they moved from Brooklyn to Long Beach, New York. Paul and my father grew up in a small beach town and did quite well in the closely-knit community. John Birkholz Sr. was a successful home builder and the Birkholz family was one of the wealthiest in town. Tragically, John Birkholz Sr. had a massive heart attack at work and died. The family was without a husband, father, and provider. My grandfather had no insurance and conducted his construction business on the basis of handshakes and verbal contracts. With nothing in writing, the business collapsed at the beginning of the Great Depression. Overnight the Birkholz family went from one of the richest families in Long Beach to one of the poorest. The children worked and pooled their earnings to put food on the table. Paul and my father told me it was just like the movies: as the children came home from various odd jobs, they put their earnings for that day into a big bowl. Their mother used their little money to buy food and fix supper. Yet they all worked together and family was very important, a value that stayed with Paul and my father all their lives.

It was only natural that, when Paul bought the Houston Wrestling promotion from the Sigel family, it became a “family” business. The entire Birkholz Family, including my father, mother, brothers, sister and I started to work every Friday night to help my uncle build Houston Wrestling back to a successful promotion.

Paul Boesch, being one of the oldest sons, constantly tried to find ways to support his mother and siblings. At the age of fourteen (Paul lied and said he was sixteen), he became a lifeguard on Long Beach. He was a standout and won several awards and recognition from the city of Long Beach. Those beaches were a vital part of Boesch’s life, because that is where he met his future wife, Eleonore Barraca. They were happily married for fifty years. Eleonore passed away on April 2, 1982, after a long battle with cancer.

Those beaches were also the meeting grounds for several other famous wrestling couples. Paul introduced then-wrestler Stu Hart to Long Beach High School graduate Helen Smith. They later became husband and wife, and wasted little time producing one of the most famous wrestling families in the business. Their twelve children were all wrestlers, referees, and promoters, or spouses of professional wrestlers. For many years, Paul Boesch bragged that his introduction of Stu Hart to Helen was his personal contribution to the world’s population. Their two most famous sons were Bret “Hitman” Hart and Owen Hart. Tragically, Owen was killed during a special pay-per-view WWE show.

Another famous wrestling couple that met on Long Beach beaches was then-wrestler Lord Blears and his future wife Jane. Lord “Tally-ho” Blears had a career as a wrestler and promoter, and served in various positions with wrestling organizations. Long Beach was also my parents' meeting ground as Paul introduced Dad, a professional wrestler and lifeguard at the time, to my mother, Rosalie Maskin.

Boesch’s lifeguard career gave him the opportunity to stay in shape and to meet important people who came to Long Beach from New York City. One such person had close ties with promoter Jack Pfefer. Boesch used that connection to meet Pfefer. The rest is professional wrestling history.

Boesch had his first professional wrestling match on October 25, 1932, launching his fifty-five-year career. He was a great athlete who was in the right spot at the right time. The New York area was packed with

wrestling stars, giving Boesch an opportunity to compete with and learn from the best. During his early career, Paul faced such legends as Dick Shikat, Jumping Joe Savoldi, Jim “The Golden Greek” Londos, Everette Marshall, Ray Steele, and Jim Browning, one of the greatest wrestlers of all time. Several of those men went on to win World Heavyweight Titles.

With his impressive record against some of the best in the business, Paul Boesch started to travel around the country and around the world. He went to Canada, the West Coast, and became a star in the Seattle, Washington territory. He accepted an offer to wrestle in New Zealand, Australia, and throughout the South Pacific. Boesch returned to the Pacific Northwest in 1937, and when a ring injury put him out of action, he had an opportunity to buy a one-half interest in the wrestling promotion in Seattle. As a young promoter, he achieved some success, but the promotion had to shut its doors. Boesch gained valuable experience from that effort, which was crucial when he was able to purchase the Gulf Athletic Club Inc. and became the official promoter of Houston Wrestling.

Fortunately for Boesch, his back injury had healed by 1938 and he was able to step back into the mat wars of Seattle and eventually New Zealand. As he traveled around Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, he also received an offer to wrestle professionally in Japan. He told me that it was a very lucrative deal, and he instructed the Japanese wrestling promoter to send him a written contract. When he received the contract, his intuition told him to wait before signing. The anxious Japanese promoter sent a telegram, pressuring him for an answer. Boesch told me that his mind said, “Yes” , but his gut said “No”! Boesch sent the unsigned contract back, which turned out to be one of the smartest decisions he ever made. If he had gone to Japan, he would have been there when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Lord only knows what would have happened to him in the enemy's country during World War II. That was not the only close call Paul Boesch had with the Japanese. He was wrestling in the Philippines before the war and decided to return to New Zealand, but other wrestlers in the tour group stayed longer and were trapped in the Philippines after the Japanese invaded. Those wrestlers lived in concentration camps during the war. Again, destiny is indeed a very precarious and powerful force.

As war raged in Europe, Boesch’s wrestling tour in Australia was cut short and he returned home to Long Beach. He was named Chief of Lifeguards, an important job in the active resort town. He wrestled around

the New York area until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Then it was time for Boesch to serve his country. He was an infantryman in the 121st Infantry Regiment of the 8th Division, was promoted to platoon leader, and finally reached the rank of company commander.

For his display of courage and valor, Boesch received the following awards:

Silver Star and cluster
Bronze Star and cluster
Purple Heart and cluster
French Croix DeGuerre
Combat Infantryman's Badge
Distinguished Unit Citation

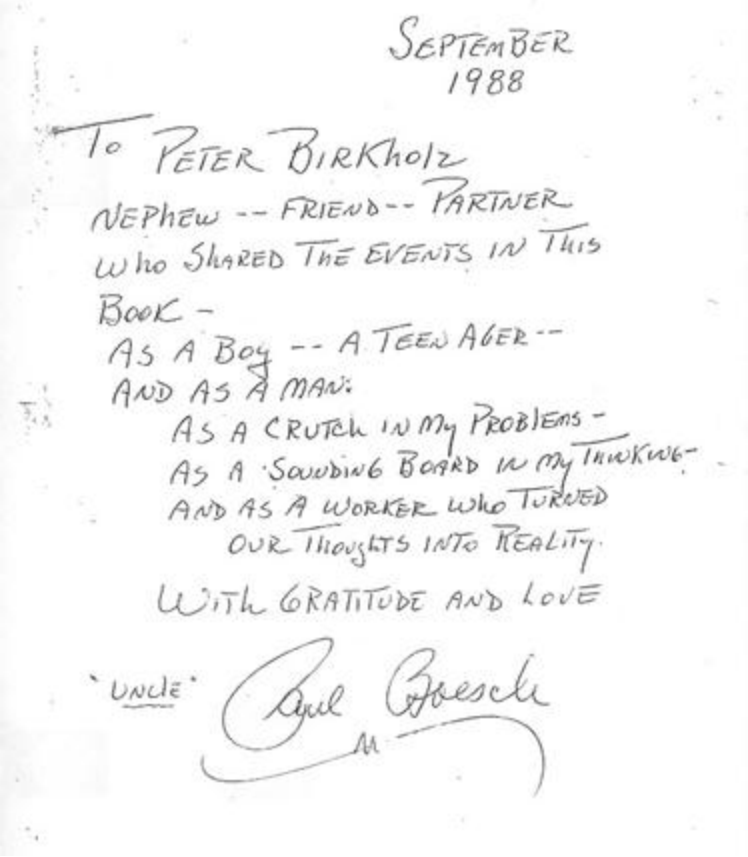
Boesch was the most decorated professional wrestler of World War II, an honor of which he was extremely proud, and one that did not go unnoticed by professional wrestling promoters around the country. After Boesch was discharged, he had a great selection of wrestling territories from which he could choose to resume his professional wrestling career. Luckily for Houston Wrestling fans, the war hero chose the Texas territory.

That territory was composed of several booking towns, with Houston as the most prominent. This was great for Boesch, because it kept him competing with top talent in the business. It also was an opportunity for him to establish a personal relationship with Morris Sigel. As I mentioned earlier, this relationship became extremely important to Paul after his auto accident, and led to his career as a radio and television announcer. As Boesch's responsibilities expanded with the Houston Wrestling promotion, so did his exposure to its fans. He became the unofficial figurehead, which was important when he assumed the job of official Houston Wrestling promoter.

His purchase of Gulf Athletic Club Inc. was officially announced to Houston Wrestling fans in the wrestling program of January 27, 1967. The entire front page was dedicated to welcoming Houston Wrestling fans to the first-ever Houston wrestling card promoted by Paul Boesch. He tried to keep members of the Sigel family, especially Ronnie Burke, involved in the business, but the Sigels thought professional wrestling had peaked and was

dying a slow death. Boesch was determined to prove them wrong. Besides, he had no other way to make a living.

Paul Boesch was a special and fascinating person. To me he was even more special because he was my uncle, mentor, partner, and most importantly, my friend whom I loved and admired. As I started to write this chapter on the man who meant so much to me, I came across an inscription that my uncle had written to me inside his wrestling manuscript Hey Boy! Where'd You Get Them Ears! In it, he expressed his feelings about our own relationship. No one could have described this bond any better. I would like to share that inscription with you:


SEPTEMBER
1988

TO PETER BIRKHOLZ
NEPHEW -- FRIEND -- PARTNER
WHO SHARED THE EVENTS IN THIS
BOOK -
AS A BOY -- A TEEN AGER --
AND AS A MAN:
AS A CRUTCH IN MY PROBLEMS -
AS A SOUNDING BOARD IN MY THINKING -
AND AS A WORKER WHO TURNED
OUR THOUGHTS INTO REALITY.
WITH GRATITUDE AND LOVE

'UNCLE' Paul Boesch

Paul Boesch was not only a great promoter, but he loved his fellow man. His life story is full of numerous tales of helping others, whether through the many organizations he supported or personal efforts. In his nearly fifty years of living in Houston, he constantly and enthusiastically championed many good causes. Whether it was the tens of thousands of young boys he

helped through the Boys Club of Houston, or other great organizations like the March of Dimes, Big Brothers and Sisters, the Veterans Association, and many others, Boesch touched millions of people in his continual efforts to support the community.

He always made you feel special with his gentle smile, his warm expression, and his firm and appreciative handshake. Boesch charmed everyone from the average man on the street to Prince Phillip of England, governors, state legislators, mayors, city council members, members of Congress, U.S. Senators and even Presidents of the United States. Of the many relationships Boesch developed, the most special and one of Boesch's favorites was the unique friendship with former President George H.W. Bush.

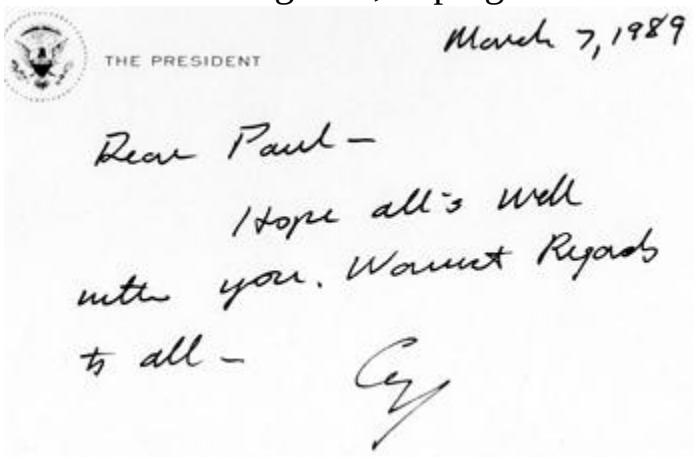
It started in 1966, when George H.W. Bush was running for the office of United States Representative from District 7 in Houston. Boesch was impressed with the young and enthusiastic Bush and invited him to the Houston Wrestling matches, where Boesch introduced him on television and the live crowd. Bush went on to win the election, and continued this new tradition of stopping by the Houston Wrestling matches every time he ran for office, including his run for President of the United States. Once he was not only endorsed by Paul Boesch, but superstar Wahoo McDaniel, who awarded George Bush a beautiful Indian headdress in the middle of the Houston Wrestling ring. It was Wahoo's way of thanking Bush for being his Little League baseball coach in Midland, Texas, when he was a little boy. Former President George H.W. Bush had relationships with many professional wrestling promoters and wrestlers in addition to Boesch and Wahoo, including Sam Muchnik, Ernie Ladd, and Ric Flair.

As a young man, it was interesting for me to witness Boesch and Bush's friendship become stronger. The men enjoyed each others' company, and stayed in touch throughout Bush's political career. In March of 1982, then-Vice-President Bush invited Boesch, myself, and our wives to have coffee with him in the White House. It was a thrill to visit with the Vice-President and be treated to a ride in his limousine. He arranged for the four of us to receive a VIP tour of the White House and the Capitol Building. I still recall how he jumped out of his office in a wrestling stance, which prompted my uncle to leap into his wrestling stance as the two men moved around the room as if they were ready to grapple. The scene was very amusing to everyone except the two secret service men, who were taken by

surprise and not sure what to do until Bush and Boesch started laughing and shaking hands.

Another Boesch and Bush story took place when Bush was running for President in 1988. Boesch was in Methodist Hospital in Houston, and his doctors had warned him that his heart condition was serious and he may not have much more time. Boesch sent a telegram to then-campaigning Bush, and wished him good luck in the upcoming election. Boesch expressed how much he cherished their friendship, and told Bush that, although he may not live much longer, for him not to worry because he had already voted absentee.

Nothing better symbolized their mutual admiration than the personal note that President Bush sent to Boesch on March 7, 1989. President Bush woke up that morning and felt an overwhelming urge to contact Boesch. He wrote the following note, hoping Boesch would contact him and the two could get together for a visit.


THE PRESIDENT

March 7, 1989

Dear Paul –

Hope all's well with you. Warmest Regards to all –

George

President Bush sent the note that morning, and Boesch died that evening. He never received the gracious note, but President Bush phoned the family to personally express his heartfelt sympathy. Paul Boesch was an extraordinary individual who loved his fellow man, his country and the professional wrestling business in which he spent the last 55 years of his life.

★ Wrestling Program ★

GULF ATHLETIC CLUB, Promoter — MRS. SHIRLEY CARRIGER, Assistant Promoter

No. 1065 — FRIDAY, JANUARY 27, 1967 — HOUSTON, TEXAS — PHONES: CA 2-2288-89 — PRICE: 25 CENTS

PAUL BOESCH BECOMES HOUSTON'S NEW WRESTLING PROMOTER BUYS GULF ATHLETIC CLUB FROM THE ESTATE OF MORRIS SIGEL

It was announced to the press this afternoon that Paul Boesch, long time associate of the late wrestling promoter Morris P. Sigel, has purchased the Gulf Athletic Club and its wrestling promotion rights from the estate of Mr. Sigel. The announcement culminated discussions and preparations that have taken place over the past several weeks and was not entirely a surprise.

Under the guidance of Morris Sigel wrestling has thrived here for the past 50 years. During the last 19 years Paul has had a share in handling some of the shows connected with the sport and has figured prominently on Television and radio coverage.

The transfer becomes an amicable continuity of the highly respected manner in which wrestling has been a part of the community that is Houston. Every effort will be made to maintain the high standards set by Mr. Sigel and to introduce innovations that will please the fans.

A STATEMENT BY MRS. MORRIS SIGEL

"I would like to add to the announcement of the sale of the Gulf Athletic Club to Paul Boesch by saying a grateful thanks to my husband's many friends and to the fans of wrestling for their support over the years. While the success of wrestling was his very life, the friends he made and kept were *the biggest part of it.*

"In selling to Paul Boesch I am keeping faith with my husband's wishes and I think Paul will do everything in his power to maintain the high standards of performance and consideration for the fans that Morris did so much to establish during his lifetime. Certainly, I know that the spirit will be there.

"I would like to appeal to all of the people who have done business with the Gulf A.C. in *the past, all of the fans who* have been so loyal, to transfer that loyalty to the new promoter. I would like to say too that in all of our dealings in the sale of the promotion I have appreciated Paul's honesty and consideration."

FIRST MESSAGE FROM PAUL BOESCH

"It is with a great deal of emotion that *I* take over the reins of wrestling here in Houston. My connection with the sport, and, with Morris Sigel have been a dominating influence in my life and I am anxious to see that what I have learned in put to good use in the future. I plan on giving wrestling promotion 100% of my time and 120% of my effort just as Morris has always done.

"While next Friday signals a new era in wrestling for *Houston it is totally unlike* other 'new eras' you may have heard about. This one will be built on a proud past, on a reputation for honesty and integrity unequalled in the sports world and brought into being by one man, Morris Sigel. Our new era will never forget him nor what he has done as we make our own future.

"I will appreciate keeping all the old fans and friends we have had over the years and making thousands of new ones. I welcome the chance with confidence and anticipation."

Next Friday night will signal the new "forward look" in wrestling. The haymate will be action and top name stars as well as those who are battling hard to make their way in the game. The card will be fast moving from beginning to end with some new ideas and some of the old ones you liked so well.

We hope fans will tell their friends of the change in the sport and bring them down to the matches. If you have a club or organization that would like to come in a body, phone the ticket office and see about a special price. Get your ticket in advance next week, come see our new office, and receive absolutely free a handsome and valuable gift free.

Wrestling will continue on television and will be telecast every Saturday night at 10:00 p.m. on Channel 39, we want you to tune in and there will always be plenty of action and some surprises.

Big name stars will continue to headline the bill, and the future will bring many of the star attractions who have never been *here in the past. If there is anyone you want to see, make the* **suggestion and we'll try to bring him here.**

Above all, we will continue to try to deserve your support and to give you more for your sports dollar than you can get by attending any other sport anywhere in the country.

BOESCH’S FIRST YEARS

Paul Boesch was wrapping up his first year as Houston Wrestling's promoter as the 1968 season began. He was determined to keep Houston Wrestling moving forward. By using a strategy of aggressive promotions and good talent, Boesch was able to make 1968 better than 1967.

He brought in new faces, like former Mr. America Steve Stanlee, Spoiler #2 (who joined the ranks of Spoiler #1), Playboy Gary Hart, 400-pound Grizzly Smith from Alaska, Dirty Dusty Rhodes (who returned to Houston Wrestling a few years later as “The American Dream”), and he brought home Jeff Davis High School graduate Manuel Ramos. Ramos was not a new face, but he had a new character: Bull Ramos. He had just finished starring in main events in both the old Madison Square Garden and the new Madison Square Garden, and had a bitter feud with WWF champion Bruno Sammartino.

Boesch used much the same strategy as Sigel: he sought wrestlers he knew would give him great action, top names, highly ranked tag teams, girl wrestlers, midget wrestlers, a wrestling bear, and he booked World Champion Gene Kiniski whenever possible. Boesch also wanted to bring an international flavor to Houston Wrestling and featured France’s Rene Goulet, Germany’s Kurt Hess, Japan’s Seiji Sakaguchi, Poland’s Firpo Zybysko, European champion Baron Raschke, and the heavyweight champion of Mexico, Pedro Valdez.

Other newcomers to the Houston Wrestling mat wars included Houston Oiler Carel Stith, Tom Jones, Pancho Lopez, Mr. Kleen, SMU graduate George Gaiser, Stan Pulaski, Jack Vansky, Billy Garret, Frankie Hester, and the wrestling bear Not-So-Gentle Ben.

1969 was perhaps Boesch's most important promotional year. The year's programs showcase a parade of talent, including many wrestlers who would become some of the biggest superstars in Houston Wrestling history.

That year helped Boesch lay the foundation that would restore Houston Wrestling as one of the capitals of the wrestling world.

To start the year, he signed a World Heavyweight Title showdown between World Champion Gene Kiniski and his arch-rival, U.S. American champion Fritz Von Erich. To make the event more spectacular, Boesch set the battle inside a wired fence with no limit on the number of falls, no time limit, no disqualifications, and no wrestling outside the ring.

Boesch also signed the “Brown Bomber,” Joe Louis (whom some claim to be the greatest heavyweight boxing champion in history) to be the special referee. This bout captured the imagination of Houston Wrestling fans who packed the Sam Houston Coliseum, and impressed fans from around the world. Von Erich, who was fighting the “Hong Kong” flu, would not back out of the match, and he gave Kiniski the battle of his life. Kiniski barely held onto his title, and Boesch drew the biggest box office gate of his early promotional career.

Kiniski and Von Erich left the ring injured. Some say Kiniski was never the same, and history gives credence to that claim. Weeks after the battle with Von Erich, Kiniski lost his World Championship belt to Dory Funk Jr. in Tampa, Florida. Dory Jr. beat Kiniski by applying his crippling "spinning toe hold" on the same leg that Kiniski had hurt while wrestling Von Erich.

Boesch went to work attempting to sign the new champion, since Houston Wrestling had the greatest challengers for the coveted belt: Fritz Von Erich, Johnny Valentine, Dr. Dan Miller, Dirty Dusty Rhodes, Jose Lothario, Ernie Ladd, Lou Thesz, Gene Kiniski, Spoiler # 1, Grizzly Smith, T-Bolt Patterson, and one of Houston Wrestling’s all-time greats, Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel, who made his debut in 1969.

Handsome Johnny Valentine returned to the Houston Wrestling ring that year. He was more explosive and controversial than ever, and grabbed the main event spotlight as he battled Fritz Von Erich, Ernie Ladd, Bull Curry, Duke Keomuka, Waldo Von Erich and defeated Dr. Dan Miller for the Texas Heavyweight title. No one could stop the “Blonde Bombshell” from Seattle, so it was with great anticipation that Dory Funk Jr. made his Houston debut as World Champion against Johnny Valentine on Friday, August 15, 1969. Funk Jr. barely held onto his new title, but proved he was just as tough as his father, Dory Sr.

The year was marked with several important debuts and returns, including the return of Jose Lothario, who would become a mainstay in Houston Wrestling for over twelve years!

As I mentioned, Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel made his Houston Wrestling debut on April 11, 1969, and became an instant sensation. He excelled at football, amateur wrestling, baseball, golf, and, most importantly, professional wrestling. Oklahoma football coach Bud Wilkenson regarded Wahoo as one of the greatest athletes he'd ever coached!

Boesch did everything he could to shape Wahoo McDaniel into a superstar, and in turn, Wahoo worked hard to make Boesch one of the biggest wrestling promoters in the country. Together they created a synergy that propelled both men to the top of their profession.

The year also marked the invasion of Russian Boris Malenko, and his arrogant Englishman manager, Lord Montague. Malenko would set box office records feuding with Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel. This year also introduced T-Bolt Patterson, Canadian strongman Reggie Parks, Crusher Kowalski, Alex Medina, Virgil Butcher, Tank Morgan, Pepe Villa, Japan's Yashimira, Sonny King, Buster Lloyd, Hercules Graham, Gorilla Lopez, Tom Andrews, and the out-of-this-world debut of the "Moonman."

Boesch also employed the talents of Texas Girl's Champion Evelyn Stevens, as she made numerous appearances against top lady grapplers, including Women's World Champion the Fabulous Moolah. There were also several appearances of midget wrestlers including the World Midget Champion, Lord Littlebrook.

Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel and Johnny Valentine also had an explosive feud that provided fans with great action and Boesch with record box office receipts. One of these showdowns occurred on Friday, October 10, 1969, with special referee Joe Louis.

On one of the occasions when Louis was brought to referee a showdown, I was working the ticket office. An elderly black man came in with a young black boy. The grandfather took his grandson to the big picture of Joe Louis on the wall, and got down in the classic boxing pose which Louis made famous. The grandfather proceeded to tell his grandson of how, when he was the young boy's age, he listened to Joe Louis fights on radio. As he told the story, he shuffled back and forth as if ducking and throwing punches. His wide-eyed grandson absorbed every word his

grandfather was saying. With big smiles on their faces, they walked up to me and the grandfather bought two wrestling tickets for the Friday night matches that would feature the “Brown Bomber.”

One of the advantages of professional wrestling is that it's a mixture of sport and showmanship. Promoters have flexibility in regards to what happens in the show. If a wrestling promoter features someone like Joe Louis even in a non-wrestling role, he has to involve that individual in the action. Fans paid hard-earned money to see their hero in person, but more importantly, they want to see him in action!

On this particular night, referee Joe Louis was taunted by the bad guy’s manager. Every time Louis was taunted, he snapped into his world-famous boxing stance and the crowd went wild, screaming for Louis to hit him. This occurred several times during the showdown, and each time the crowd screamed louder. Finally, the manager pushed Louis too far. Louis jumped into his stance and threw his powerful right punch, decking the manager. He hit the ground like a ton of bricks, and the good guy took advantage of the chaos and won the match. While the good guy won, Joe Louis was the hero! “Good” had again triumphed over “evil.”

As the crowd was cheering, something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I looked up in the stands and saw the grandfather and grandson jumping up and down, cheering and hugging each other. One can only assume that no matter what happened in that young boy’s life, he would never forget the night that his grandfather took him to see the legendary Joe Louis. Maybe that is what professional wrestling is all about--creating memories which fans cherish for the rest of their lives.

In 1969, Houston Wrestling also set a record for its television show. Ratings climbed, and it became the number one watched television show during its time slot, as well as one of the highest-rated shows in the Houston television market. These figures encouraged Channel 39 to make the show ninety minutes instead of the standard sixty-minutes, and to air the show twice a week. *Houston Wrestling* could be seen on Saturday night from 10:00 pm to 11:30 pm, with a rebroadcast on Sunday afternoon from 3:00 pm to 4:30 pm. The rebroadcast eventually moved to Sunday morning, 9:30 am to 11:00 am. This new ninety-minute format lasted for the next eighteen years!

The sixties started off precariously, as the professional wrestling business tried to adjust to television challenges, declining box office

receipts, and in the case of Houston Wrestling, the loss of the old City Auditorium and Promoter Morris Sigel. The encouraging news was that Houston Wrestling not only survived these challenges, but emerged stronger than before. Now the challenge for Boesch and the professional wrestlers was to carry this momentum into the next decade.

THE SURGING SEVENTIES

Boesch launched the seventies with a showdown between World Champion Dory Funk Jr. and the number one contender, Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel. Boesch had a special give-away that night as thousands and thousands of “Wahoo” buttons were presented to fans. Wahoo had developed into a Houston Wrestling superstar--attendance at live wrestling matches was growing at a record-setting pace and the television show made “Wahoo” a household name. On Friday, January 2, 1970, fans witnessed a battle that ended in a sixty-minute draw. The new wrestling year was off to a sensational start.

As box office receipts increased, so did wrestlers' pay-offs. When that happens, promoters can easily keep top talent while other top stars desperately try to get booked in the hot market. This was the case at Houston Wrestling in 1970. Boesch kept superstars like Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel, Fritz Von Erich, Johnny Valentine, Ernie Ladd, Professor Boris Malenko, Killer Kowalski, Spoiler # 1, Gene Kiniski, Bull Curry, Killer Karl Kox, Lord Montague, Gary Hart, Nick Kozak, “Mr. Wrestling” Tim Woods, and the entire Funk family--World Champion Dory Funk Jr., Terry Funk, and their father Dory Funk Sr.

Just when fans thought it couldn't get any better, Mil Mascaras, “the man with a thousand masks,” came on the scene! Mascaras was a professional wrestling legend in Mexico, and a legend in the movie and television industries. He was a great athlete and an outstanding addition to the Houston Wrestling superstar dressing room.

One of the biggest feuds that year featured Wahoo McDaniel against Russian Professor Boris Malenko, who was managed by Lord Montague. This feud rivaled the one between Wahoo and Johnny Valentine, as longtime fans still talk about the devastating blows they exchanged in the Sam Houston Coliseum. Wahoo was also continuing his assault on World Champion Dory Funk Jr. Wahoo was a busy athlete, and making big, big bucks!

Even Boesch entered the action, facing Professor Boris Malenko in an added attraction with a ten-minute time limit. Malenko boasted that it would take less than ten minutes to beat “Mr. TV Announcer,” a term that he made famous when addressing Boesch. Boesch looked great for the first eight minutes, but the last two must have felt like an eternity. He barely

survived, but one of the main advantages of being the promoter and the man who signs checks was his ability to set time limits. Nevertheless, Houston fans enjoyed watching Boesch in action again.

The biggest card of the year was on Friday, May 30, 1970, one that drew the biggest crowd in Texas Wrestling history at that time. The five title showdowns featured World Champion Dory Funk Jr. against number one contender Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel, Boris Malenko risking his American Heavyweight title against Fritz Von Erich, Johnny Valentine with his Texas Heavyweight title on the line against Mil Mascaras, Texas Girls champion Evelyn Stevens challenging Betty Nicoli, and Spoiler #1 battling Killer Kowalski for the Texas Brass Knucks trophy. Terry Funk also made his debut on that historic night. His outside interference caused Wahoo to lose against his brother, Dory Funk Jr. Now the issue became personal, as Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel was on the warpath against the entire Funk family!

The summer action at Houston Wrestling was just as hot as the soaring temperatures. After the May 30th record setter, Boesch signed a showdown between Wahoo McDaniel and Professor Boris Malenko, with the loser getting his head shaved in the middle of the ring. Malenko lost, so ten thousand fans frantically celebrated as he was shorn. Newly-bald Malenko challenged Wahoo McDaniel to a brutal and bloody Russian Chain Match, so Boesch jumped at the opportunity and signed the match with Ernie Ladd as referee. The bout drew ten thousand fans. Wahoo was again victorious, but Malenko, who now wore a leather helmet, was not convinced. A few months later, Malenko challenged Wahoo to a Russian Chain Match with the loser having to leave town. The sold-out crowd cheered Wahoo to victory, after which Malenko packed his bags. Houston Wrestling fans would have to find someone else to “love to hate.”

Mil Mascaras and Johnny Valentine also battled that summer, while Valentine was involved in battles for the Brass Knucks trophy against Wild Bull Curry and Killer Kowalski. Wahoo was summarily defeating various members of the Funk family. Terry was first in town. After Wahoo beat him, Terry’s dad, Dory Funk Sr., had to revenge the loss. Wahoo whipped the patriarch, and was crowned the “King of Wrestling” by Houston fans. If Dory Funk Jr. wanted Wahoo knocked off his throne, he would have to do it personally.

The Houston Wrestling summer season caught the attention of the NWA, which declared Houston, “The Wrestling City of the Seventies,” at their annual convention. Boesch was presented with the award on television by a special Houston Wrestling fan, Congressman George H.W. Bush. Bush stayed the whole evening so he could watch his former Little League baseball player, Wahoo McDaniel, beat Terry Funk in the main event.

The fall season kicked off with the long-expected return match between World Champion Dory Funk Jr. and unofficial “King of Wrestling” Wahoo McDaniel. The World Title showdown ended without a clear winner, so the NWA became involved and ordered a final showdown between Funk Jr. and Wahoo McDaniel. This would be a Texas Death Match with a special referee, Wild Bull Curry.

Dory Funk Jr. remained the champion by taking advantage of the Texas Death Match rules, which meant no disqualifications. The champion pulled every trick in the book, while Wahoo refused to use excuses. Houston Wrestling fans respected his honor. As far as they were concerned, he was still their “King of Wrestling.”

Toru Tanaka, the toughest Japanese star since Duke Keomuka invaded the Houston Wrestling scene, entering the Bayou City in a storm of controversy. He demolished all comers. Fans demanded that Boesch find someone to stop him. Boesch chose Johnny Valentine, who fans agreed was tough, though they did not like the arrogant blonde from Seattle. Yet there are times when a wrestling promoter must match two bad guys, though he would rather have a good-versus-evil showdown. But, occasionally, things work out differently then any promoter, wrestler, or fan can predict. That is exactly what happened that night.

Tanaka was to face Valentine, but Valentine was flying in from the west coast and called to inform Boesch that his flight had been canceled and he would have to take a later one. Nothing hurts a wrestling town more than a substitution, especially one in the main event. Valentine also did not want his reputation tarnished if he didn't show, so Boesch frantically went to work. The intermissions were stretched to give Valentine more time, and Boesch sent one of Houston’s finest in his patrol car to pick up Valentine from the airport. The fans were getting restless, while Boesch stayed in radio contact with his officer friend. The plane had landed and Valentine was in the back of the patrol car, putting on his wrestling tights. He needed more time.

Boesch entered the ring with Toru Tanaka and took the ringside microphone so that he could inform the crowd that Johnny Valentine was on his way. Tanaka grabbed the mike and insisted on being declared the winner because Valentine had run out on his contract. He accused Valentine of being like other American wrestlers, chicken and afraid to wrestle him. As Tanaka continued his verbal assault, the garage door at the north end of the Sam Houston Coliseum opened up and the Houston Police patrol car with blinking lights and siren wailing rushed in. The car came to a screeching halt and the back door flew open. Out stepped Johnny Valentine, in his traditional black robe.

The Houston crowd erupted. It was bedlam. As Valentine made his way to the wrestling ring, he worked the crowd like only he could work it. The fans were in a complete frenzy, and just like that Johnny Valentine went from “bad” guy to one of Houston Wrestling’s most beloved stars. He won the match and the hearts of his new fans that night.

Boesch often used a six hundred pound wrestling bear by the name of Not-So-Gentle Ben to keep fans entertained. Not-So-Gentle Ben’s events sold a lot of tickets, especially if promoted properly. Many times, Boesch set the match up by tricking a “bad guy” or his manager into signing a blank contract, then, much to the delight of fans, he informed the wrestler that he had signed a contract to wrestle the bear. The bad guy jumped up and down screaming, while fans cheered and the cash register chimed.

Once the promoter signed the match, he had to let everybody know that the wrestling bear would be at the Sam Houston Coliseum. He used the television show, arena wrestling program, and personal appearances to publicize the event. In 1970, bear trainer and professional wrestler Nick Adams had booked the bear on the day before the Friday night wrestling matches. The bear was performing at the annual boat show held at the Astrohall. My uncle never passed up an opportunity to sell more wrestling tickets, so he grabbed my father and I after we had closed the ticket office, and the three of us rode to the Astrohall to take advantage of the publicity opportunity.

All went smoothly until Adams suggested to my uncle that maybe I should wrestle the bear before he made his pitch to the nearly eight hundred people in attendance. Boesch thought it was a great idea, and so did my father. Personally, I thought the idea sucked, but nobody asked me. Adams suggested I take my shirt off so it would not get ripped apart by the bear. I

was not exactly a happy Assistant to the Promoter at that particular moment, concerned that more than my shirt would be ripped.

While frantically trying to devise a really good excuse to leave, I looked up and saw the bear regarding me as if I were his evening snack. Keep in mind that I was seventeen, stood only five feet eight inches tall, and weighed a whopping 132 pounds (my weight class when I was wrestling my senior year in high school). Although I was a competent amateur wrestler, I really did not like my chances against the bear. I looked to my uncle and my father. Both of them often gave me a stare that I would like to say spoke a thousand words. At that particular moment, however, their stare suggested I should get my butt up there. I again looked at the bear, back to the stern stares of my uncle and my father, and decided that I had a better chance of survival against the bear.

As I reluctantly started up the steps of the wrestling platform where the bear was waiting, Nick Adams grabbed my arm and whispered in my ear that there was a very important secret to wrestling the bear. He asked if I wanted to know the secret. I answered with a panicked, “Hell yes.” I usually do not like to cuss, however at the time the situation warranted a little more than a polite, “Why yes, that would be very nice.”

He whispered, “Pete, the wrestling bear is trained so that if you push him lightly, he will push you back lightly. However, if you shove him hard, he will knock you on your ass.” It was a very good detail to know.

When Adams blew the whistle, Not-So-Gentle Ben and I hooked up in the upright referee’s position. I decided to test “the secret of wrestling the wrestling bear,” and lightly pushed against No-So-Gentle-Ben. Much to my delight and relief, the wrestling bear went backward as if I was strong enough to shove him. Then the bear pushed lightly against me. Being the good sport that I am, I wisely took a few backward steps.

I thought *Hey, this is a really cool*. Not-So-Gentle Ben and I maneuvered back and forth, mixing in some wrestling moves much to the delight of the people watching the exhibition. After about five minutes of “wrestling,” Nick Adams blew the whistle and Not-So-Gentle Ben swept my legs out from under me with his powerful right paw. I landed on my back and Not-So-Gentle Ben pounced on top of me. The match was over.

My uncle was happy, since he could give his sales pitch to the audience, and convince them to buy tickets and see the wrestling bear in action at the Sam Houston Coliseum on Friday night. Nick Adams was

happy because the bear and I put on a good show. Not-So-Gentle Ben was happy because he was sitting on a chair drinking his victory beverage, a family-size bottle of Coca-Cola, as the fans cheered. I was ecstatic because I was still alive, thanks to Nick Adams's "secret."

Adams took the microphone from Boesch and, after asking the fans to give me a hand for a well-fought battle, he challenged anybody in the crowd to wrestle his bear. If they lasted more than ten minutes, he would give them a thousand dollars. Quite a few big men from the crowd headed for the platform, taking off their shirts as the crowd cheered them on. They must have thought that if a runt like me could almost beat the bear, they had a great chance of winning a cool grand. Unfortunately for them, Nick Adams did not explain the "secret." Boy were they surprised when they shoved the bear with all their might and Not-So-Gentle Ben knocked them on their asses! Nobody collected the prize! I guess wrestling a wrestling bear is like life itself--if you know the "secret," it is so much easier.

Boesch was a firm believer in giving back to the community, much like the first Houston Wrestling promoter, Morris Sigel. One of the most popular ways Boesch did that was through a campaign he started with a world-renowned heart specialist, Houston's own Dr. Denton Cooley. Anybody who gave a pint of blood to the blood center received two free Houston Wrestling tickets from Boesch. The Houston Wrestling program of Friday, January 16, 1970 featured pictures of Dr. Cooley and Boesch giving blood. Through the years, thousands of fans must have given blood because of that incentive.

Rounding out the list of newcomers to Houston Wrestling in 1970 were Ken Lusk, Ripper Secuna, Tony Pug, Emil Dupree from France, Spain's Juan Sebastian, The Big "O" Bob Orton Sr., Ronnie Etchison, Don Drummer, Jack Sanders, Jim Pesek, Jimmy Valiant, and the well-respected George Scott.

Houston Wrestling began 1971 with its own version of the Super Bowl, as Dory Funk Jr. once again defended his World Heavyweight Championship belt against Wahoo McDaniel. It was another Texas Death Match, and in those bouts there has to be an absolute winner. This time there were also two National Wrestling Alliance judges at ringside to settle any disputes or controversies. Fans packed the Sam Houston Coliseum to capacity.

The overall consensus by NWA wrestling promoters and fans across the nation was that Dory Jr. made a great World Champion. Their previous doubts had been erased! He produced action inside the ring, and whatever charisma he may have lacked outside it was made up for by his boisterous brother, Terry, and his father, Dory Funk Sr. Fans loved to hate the Funks singly or together.

Dory Funk Jr. and Wahoo McDaniel had another tremendous battle. Fans claimed it was one of greatest matches they had ever seen! Dory Jr. held onto the belt and Wahoo went back to taking on all challengers.

Texas Heavyweight Champion Johnny Valentine was also going strong, and even forced the masked star Mr. Wrestling to unmask in the ring and reveal his true identity--Tim Woods--before being allowed to fight for the Texas title. Other interesting events that year included the debut of George “The Blimp” Harris as manager of the international tag team of Hungarian Bronko Lubich and Russian Chris Markoff. Fans watched the debut of Gorgeous George II with a critical eye. He wanted to restore the color and excitement of the original Gorgeous George. As hard as he tried, fans were not convinced.

One of the most entertaining moments of 1971 was when Boris Malenko, still barred from Houston Wrestling because of his “loser leave town” match against Wahoo McDaniel, sent a television interview featuring a challenge from a masked “Mr. Houston” to Wahoo McDaniel. The interview was a classic, and it is a shame that all copies have been lost. It started with Malenko being interviewed by Lord Montague. Malenko vowed revenge against Wahoo McDaniel. In his rich British accent, Montague suggested that Malenko get “Mr. Houston.” Soon there was a masked man wearing the same street clothes as Malenko, talking to Montague with a similar rugged voice. “Mr. Houston” demanded a chance to defeat Wahoo in Houston so justice could be done and his friend Malenko could return to the Bayou City. If there was any doubt that “Mr. Houston” was really Malenko, it was eliminated as he shrugged his shoulders, rolled his eyes, looked right into the television camera, and referred to Paul Boesch as “Mr. TV Announcer.” Malenko had done the same for years on Houston television. To cap it all off, “Mr. Houston” walked away, and Malenko reappeared with his hair messed up as if he'd quickly taken off a wrestling mask. It was one of the most entertaining interviews to ever air on the Houston Wrestling television show.

Fans raved about it, demanding that Boesch bring “Mr. Houston” to Houston Wrestling to take on Wahoo McDaniel. Everybody knew it was Malenko, since he and Boesch made every effort to assure that none of the fans would feel they were being mislead. Boesch gave fans what they wanted, and brought “Mr. Houston” back in a Russian chain match with the stipulation that if Wahoo lost, Malenko could return. Fans happily packed the Sam Houston Coliseum one more time, while Malenko, Wahoo, and Boesch happily made big money. There is no limit to what a great imagination could produce in the wild and wacky world of Professional Wrestling!

Wahoo McDaniel and Johnny Valentine also fought as a tag team that year, battling Houston Wrestling bad guys. Boesch returned to the ring to take on Manager George “The Blimp” Harris in a special event that occurred for two important reasons. First, it caught the imagination of Houston Wrestling fans who wanted to see Paul Boesch in the ring again. Second, Boesch was not ready to “bronze” his wrestling boots just yet.

The Houston Wrestling promotion was having great success, and received recognition not only from the wrestling world, but from organizations throughout the area. The City of Houston issued a proclamation honoring Promoter Paul Boesch and the work he and the wrestling promotion had done for the Bayou City through the years. Boesch was selected as “Mr. Sportsman” by the interfaith charities, and was honored at a big banquet and at the halftime of a University of Houston football game at the Astrodome.

That year, Boesch was finally able to bring Mexican movie, television, and wrestling star El Santo to Houston. (El Santo was also Mil Mascaras’ idol). When El Santo came to Houston, he drew hardcore Mexican wrestling fans, and the promotion made sure there were plenty of bilingual ticket sellers. It was always fun to watch the arena erupt into chants of “Mexico! Mexico! Mexico!” as thousands of fans and generations of families waved Mexican flags and cheered their old country idols on to victory.

But there was also tragic news that year. Houston Wrestling favorite Al Torres, the youngest of the famous Torres brothers, was killed in a wrestling match in Sioux City, Iowa. His opponent came off the top rope and accidentally crushed his chest. Torres was taken to the hospital, where he died a few hours later. It was a sobering reminder of how hazardous the

wrestling business could be. Wrestlers put themselves in danger every night, whether in the ring or due to extensive travel, especially by automobile. Their courage should always be recognized and appreciated.

Other wrestlers who saw action in the Houston Wrestling ring for the first time that year included Klondike Bill, Johnny Walker, Jack Bence, Eli Kashey, Gary Fulton, Bob Ramstead, Bobby Shane, Buddy Wolfe, Mexican star Ray Mendoza, Bob Burns, George Hultz, Luke Brown, and popular Dean Ho of Hawaii.

Houston Wrestling traditionally began the new year with a World Title match. 1972 was no exception. Ernie Ladd challenged Dory Funk Jr. for the World Heavyweight Championship. This tradition was honored because it was easier to book the World Champion from the National Wrestling Alliance during the first week of each year, and because Houston Wrestling shut down for the two weeks around Christmas. This period, when the business went dark, made it extremely important to have a blockbusting card signed and be selling tickets to the next big event. If wrestling fans got out of the Friday night habit, they might not come back. Regardless, it was always a great promotional strategy to start the new year with something special, and World Champion Dory Funk Jr. was somebody *really* special.

Mexican star Jose Lothario was rising to the top of Texas wrestling. He won both the Texas Heavyweight Championship belt and the Texas Brass Knucks Championship belt. These championships made him the number one contender for Dory Funk Jr.’s World Title. When Lothario got his shot at Dory Funk Jr., he won the match on a disqualification, so Funk Jr. retained the title. Lothario was enraged and stole Dory Funk Jr.’s cherished West Texas State University letter jacket, which Dory had proudly worn into the ring before the match. Lothario would not give it back, which set up a personal feud between him and the Funk family.

The Funks abandoned their ongoing battle with Wahoo McDaniel to launch one with Lothario. Terry Funk tried to beat Lothario for the prized jacket and failed. This meant Dory Funk Jr. had to return to Houston and whip Lothario himself. Lothario's two championship belts and feud with the Funks elevated him to the top of the Texas mat wars, a position that he maintained throughout the seventies.

High-flying Red Bastien made a sensational debut to Houston Wrestling that year, and proved his national ranking to Boesch and the fans.

Bastien found himself in the thick of the main event battles, and had two opportunities to take on Dory Funk Jr. for the World Title. Crusher Stan Staziak returned to Houston Wrestling and packed a powerful “heart punch.” He cracked the main event scene, causing havoc in the ring. El Gran Goliat, the national champion of Mexico, came to Houston to challenge other great Mexican stars like Jose Lothario and Mil Mascaras.

Ron Pritchard, who played linebacker for the Houston Oilers at that time, was a big hit in his Houston Wrestling debut. However, football season was starting, so Pritchard had to temporarily hang up his wrestling tights and put on the football pads. Another debut that year featured Tiger Conway Jr., a second generation wrestler and son of proud dad Tiger Conway Sr. Houston Wrestling fans fell in love with the handsome athlete just like they had grown to love his dad.

Boesch maintained his tag team talent, including teams of Red Bastien and Red Lyons, the Alaskans, El Gran Goliat and Blackie Gordman, Jose Lothario and Mil Mascaras, Ernie Ladd and Wahoo McDaniel, and the Funk brothers. Mil Mascara and El Santo also teamed up together one historic Friday night, and at the end of the year, the Missouri Mauler came as one half of another tag team, managed by Playboy Gary Hart.

Boesch promoted some shows in the new Hofheinz Pavilion on the campus of the University of Houston, a historic occasion since it was the first time that a major professional wrestling show had been promoted on a major college campus in the Southwest. Boesch was trying to find a suitable facility for shows when the Sam Houston Coliseum was not available. The Pavilion was a great sports arena, but he had a difficult time convincing Houston Wrestling fans to come to the University of Houston campus for professional wrestling.

That year also marked the deaths of two Houston Wrestling favorites, Ray Gunkel and Luis Hernandez. Gunkel died from a ring injury suffered in Georgia, while Hernandez died while on a wrestling tour of Japan. It could not be completely determined if Hernandez’s death was directly related to a ring injury. He was also the stepfather of future Houston Wrestling star Gorgeous Gino Hernandez.

There were several newcomers to Houston Wrestling in 1972 in addition to those already mentioned. They include Mr. Fuji, Crusher Verdu, Jack Swayze, Pete Sanchez, Gypsy Rosario, Tommy Seigler, Apache

Gringo, Alaskan Frank Monte, Pedro Godoy, Steve Hagan, John L. Sullivan, Johnny Rico, Canadian Chris Colt, Frank Marconi, George Strickland, Ricky Thompson, Don Serrano, and Gene Yates, a Galena Park schoolteacher.

The opening card of the 1973 season featured the debut of Ivan Putski, the Polish strongman who could not speak English. Each week, Putski won his match, and demonstrated his strength with a new strongman feat in the arena and on the Houston Wrestling television show. He muscled his way into the hearts of Houston Wrestling fans, who loved his character. Putski played it extremely well and found himself in the main event spotlight.

Much of the action in 1973 centered around the World Heavyweight Championship, beginning on January 12th when World Champion Dory Funk Jr. defended his title against Ernie Ladd. The picture became even more interesting when Jack Brisco, the outstanding wrestler out of Oklahoma, returned to Houston Wrestling after spending years beating the top competition around the country.

Brisco had developed into a seasoned veteran who experts predicted could be the next World Champion. Brisco was determined to win, quickly established himself as the number one contender, and was scheduled to face Dory Funk Jr. for the World Title in Houston.

Dory Funk Jr. kept avoiding the red hot Jack Brisco. Boesch finally signed the showdown for Friday, March 2nd. Houston Wrestling fans expected a showdown, but were shocked to discover that Dory Funk Jr. had been injured two days earlier in a truck accident at his flying mare ranch in Umbarger, Texas. Boesch scrambled to minimize the damage by signing Fritz Von Erich to wrestle Brisco. Boesch also added extra matches to the card, and announced to fans that if they wanted their money back, they could get a refund from the box office. Interestingly enough, less than fifty fans decided to ask for a refund. The remaining eight thousand understood the situation and decided not to miss the show.

Dory Funk Jr.'s injury was a hot discussion topic for wrestling promotions around the country. There was no doubt that he had been in a truck accident, but no one knew how badly he'd been injured and if he would ever be able to wrestle again. Was he using this truck accident as an excuse to avoid Brisco? A debate raged among promoters, wrestlers, fans, and, most importantly, National Wrestling Alliance officials.

As Dory Funk Jr. was slowly recuperating and refusing to talk to promoters and wrestling officials, Brisco battled tough competition to maintain his number one ranking. Brisco was frustrated and found it difficult to stay focused on his matches, since he just wanted to challenge Dory Funk Jr. One of the biggest tests for Brisco was going to be his match against Wahoo McDaniel in Houston, but his flight from Tampa was canceled and a later flight ran into a storm. Brisco could not get to the Sam Houston Coliseum in time to battle Wahoo, which further upset him since he had never missed a match in his amateur and professional careers. Some fans wanted to think Brisco had purposely missed his match, but Wahoo McDaniel and everyone else knew the competitive Brisco would never do that.

The showdown took place two weeks later, with Brisco coming out with a big win over Wahoo. He was still number one, but where was World Champion Dory Funk Jr.? Brisco had to battle *Terry* Funk, whom he defeated. Still no Dory Funk Jr. Then came news that there was a new World Champion: Handsome Harley Race. He had defeated the still-not-one-hundred-percent Dory Funk Jr. in the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas on Thursday,May 24th! The storm of controversy burst into a full-blown hurricane of accusations. Brisco wanted answers, and fans wanted him to get his well-deserved shot at the World Title.

All the National Wrestling Alliance promoters wanted Harley Race, the new champion. Race took on all the top contenders, yet avoided the number one contender, Jack Brisco. He even defended his new belt in Houston against stars like Jose Lothario and Ivan Putski. Race was proving to promoters and fans that he was a worthy champion, but he had not proved it against Jack Brisco.

Boesch and Brisco were determined to have this match, so Boesch pulled every string he could. The National Wrestling Alliance awarded Boesch the coveted bout. The national spotlight of professional wrestling focused on Houston on Friday, July 20, 1973. Even National Wrestling Alliance president, Sam Muchnik, flew down to witness the match. The showdown went back and forth with both competitors giving their all, but when the bout came to its sudden end.

Jack Brisco was the new World Heavyweight Champion!

Houston Wrestling fans erupted into cheers, realizing they had just witnessed professional wrestling history. Brisco was elated and so was the

National Wrestling Alliance, as they had one of the most popular stars in professional wrestling as their new World Champion. I will never forget the wild celebration or the jubilant Jack Brisco celebrating in the wrestlers' dressing room after his victory. I will also never forget the dejected Harley Race, as he silently sat in the corner wondering what would become of his career. But wrestling fans know that Harley Race did not stay down for long, and that Jack Brisco made a great World Heavyweight Champion!

Brisco's victory opened up the floodgates. As dozens of top contenders poured out, the new World Champion found himself frantically fighting to hold onto his belt. Top contenders and promoters all wanted a piece of Jack Brisco. The situation at Houston Wrestling was the same. As soon as the euphoria of Brisco's victory wore off, Boesch went to work trying to find the right man who could beat Brisco. That was the nature of the business.

Yet 1973 was a tough year for the Funk family. After Dory Funk Jr. lost his title, his father died nine days later, on June 2nd. Some people close to the Funk family felt that Dory Sr. died of a broken heart after his son's title loss.

Other action in 1973 involved the debut of Blackjack Jack Mulligan, the six-foot eight-inch 310-pound cowboy from Eagle Pass, Texas. He upset Jose Lothario for the Texas Heavyweight Title. This event positioned him as the man to beat, so Ernie Ladd, Wahoo McDaniel, Mil Mascaras, Jose Lothario, Johnny Valentine and Polish Power Ivan Putski all went after him. Other stars invading the Houston Wrestling ring that year included the big Russian Nicolai Volkoff, Dos Caras (the younger brother of Mil Mascaras), "Nature Boy" Ric Flair (who made a quick appearance), Great Mephisto, and Jerry Brisco, the younger brother of World Champion Jack Brisco. Jerry Brisco was trying to fulfill the same role that Terry Funk played when his older brother Dory Jr. was World Champion. He wanted to soften up the competition and protect his older brother Jack's backside.

One of the most interesting Houston Wrestling events featured the debut of John Fargo (who really was Greg Valentine). Greg wanted to make a name for himself in professional wrestling and without relying on the reputation of his dad, Johnny Valentine. Although he used the name of John Fargo, Greg Valentine did not fool wrestling fans. One look at Greg and they knew he was Johnny Valentine's son. Even his wrestling style was the

same. It did not take long for Greg to ditch the “John Fargo” alias after he left Houston Wrestling.

The biggest Houston Wrestling debut of 1973 was, quite literally, Andre the Giant. He stood seven foot four inches tall, and weighed over 424 pounds! Andre the Giant was being billed as the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” and indeed he was. He was an unbelievable athlete not only in size but also in athletic ability. He was given offers to play several professional sports, including professional soccer. He played the striker position in soccer as he was growing up, and despite his size, was extremely agile. Yet these other offers could not come close to matching the money that he could make in professional wrestling.

Other debuts included The Viking, Ricky Gibson, Wilhelm Lehman, Dewey Robertson, Cisco Grimaldi, Bob Whitlock, Ricky Hunter, John Foley, Gene Lewis, Rubin Juarez, Ray Glenn, Raul Mata, Leo Seitz, Tommy Tauruta, Paul DeMarco, Mack Quarry, Kosrow Vasiri, Man Mountain Mike, Butcher Branigan, and Matt Gibson.

Yet in addition to the loss of Dory Funk Sr., Houston Wrestling said good-bye to one of its most beloved stars of the forties and fifties, Blackie Guzman. The Houston Wrestling family also lost one of its dearest fans, Mrs. Elizabeth Chappell, better known as “Big Mama.” “Big Mama” had a heart of gold, and baked a huge Easter cake to feed hundreds of children on Good Friday matches every year. Many fans felt like “Big Mama” was part of their family, and they would dearly miss her.

Boesch launched an intense effort to keep the Houston Wrestling promotion at the top of the business in 1974, since superstars like Johnny Valentine, Toru Tanaka, and Wahoo McDaniel were moving on to other territories. The Funk family was also absent, trying to recuperate from their losses of 1973. One of the challenges of promoting professional sports, especially wrestling, is that successful promoters must keep pushing themselves to maintain that level of top talent and crowd-pleasing action.

The year began with its customary bang: the first Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal! Fans loved the event, the box office loved the event, and Boesch decided to make it an annual tradition since it was a great way to keep Houston Wrestling fans talking throughout the Christmas holiday and tuning in to the television show for the latest developments. Crowds filled the Sam Houston Coliseum and reestablished their “Friday night habit.”

World Heavyweight Champion Jack Brisco was extremely busy trying to satisfy the National Wrestling Alliance and professional wresting promoters by being a “fighting champion.” Boesch kept him occupied, signing Brisco to risk his World Championship belt against former World Champion Harley Race. Race had recently injured Jack Brisco‘s younger brother, Jerry, and now Jack wanted revenge. Race was also out for revenge against the man who defeated him for the World Title. They met in the same Houston Wrestling ring, and Brisco narrowly held on to his World Championship belt.

As always, the year featured many of the top tag teams in wrestling, including appearances by the Wild Samoans Siki and Afa Andai, Blackjack Lanza debuting in a team with Blackjack Mulligan, Jose Lothario and Mil Mascaras, El Gran Goliat and Blackie Gordman, Ernie Ladd and Bobo Brazil, Red Bastien and Ken Patera, Jose Lothario and El Santo, and several appearances by World Tag Team Champions Nick Bockwinkel and Ray Stevens.

On April 19, 1974 Olympian Weightlifting star Ken Patera made his Houston Wrestling debut. Patera was one of the most respected athletes in the world, since he was the first American to “clean and jerk” over five hundred pounds in world competition. Patera was predicted to upset the current weightlifting world champion Russian Vasily Alexeev in the Summer Olympics of 1972. Unfortunately, Patera’s knee was injured during the competition and the Russian won the gold. Despite the upset, Patera had several options in professional sports. He chose wrestling and became a top star. (Incidentally, Ken’s brother, Jack Patera, was at one time the head coach of the National Football League’s Seattle Seahawks.)

This year also featured the first appearance of Superstar Billy Graham. Fans soon demanded a showdown between Graham and Patera, and Boesch obliged. The two competed not only in wrestling matches but also various other feats of strength. One of their most impressive bouts was a bench weightlifting competition that had Houston Wrestling fans at the edge of their seats. The spotters added more and more weights. Both men successfully bench-pressed the tremendous load. Patera even bench-pressed the weight twice to show Graham that he was just warming up. Graham apparently realized that Patera was going to win the contest, so he attacked Patera and injured the Olympian, ending the weightlifting competition. This

incident started a personal feud, again leading to more action for fans and plenty of money for Patera and Superstar.

A second hot feud that year involved Mexican star El Gran Markus. After making his debut, he was soon battling Jose Lothario in a feud that would last for years. To add more fuel to the battle, El Gran Markus insisted that he was not Mexican, which infuriated Mexican wrestling fans.

It was another banner year for debut appearances. Bob Orton Jr., Stan Hansen, Dick Slater, Canadian Angelo Mosca (a former Notre Dame football star), Hawaiian Don Muraco, Scott Casey (a graduate of West Texas State University), and Mexican star Alberto Madril all made their first appearances inside the Houston Wrestling ring. Other new faces included The Baron (manager of El Gran Markus), Jerry Timmons, J.C. Wingo, Jerry Oates, Big Joe Cassidy, The Masked Avenger, Scotland's Black Angus, Olympian wrestler Bob Roop, Doug Somers, Frenchman Pierre Martine, Tio Tio from Pango, Pango, South American Inca Peru, Frenchy La Salle, Japan's Mr. Kung Fu, The Golden Hawk, Bobby Gracia, Paul Pershman, Jim Drummer, Asesino Negro, Geoff Portz, Bill Crouch, Bearcat Brown, Doug Gilbert, and the masked Texan, who was unmasked as Mike McCord.

Boesch secured a record-breaking year at the box office, due to the constant stream of top talent, more Sam Houston Coliseum and Hofheinz Pavilion dates, and fewer events at the much smaller Fonde Recreation Center.

Boesch launched 1975 with his second Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal for $22,000.00. He also made sure to enter the year with many of 1974's proven stars, maintaining that record-setting momentum.

The feud between Jose Lothario and El Gran Markus needed a new twist. That came in the form of the Masked Baron, who entered the Houston Mat Wars to manage El Gran Markus and add fuel to the feud. The Baron kept interfering in El Gran Markus' matches, so Boesch put Lothario and Markus in a steel cage one night. Another night had the Baron hanging in a cage high above the ring so that he could not interfere. Boesch milked the rivalry to its full extent. The ultimate showdown took place late that year with Jose Lothario and El Gran Markus battling each other in a Texas Death Match, with the loser having to leave the state of Texas. Lothario won and Markus was sent back to Mexico, much to the delight of fans.

Roddie Piper also made his Houston debut that year, a handsome "baby face" who won fans over on the night he played the national anthem on his bagpipes. Though a crowd favorite, Piper could not break into the main event spotlight, so he traveled to another territory. He soon realized that he could make more money as a bad guy, so he changed his name to Rowdy Roddie Piper. Most of you wrestling fans know the rest of the story, as Piper became a big "heel" for Vince McMahon and the WWE in the early eighties.

Other top names that came to Houston that year included Wahoo McDaniels's protégé, Bobby Bruggers. Bruggers was a star professional football player for many years. However, like Wahoo, Ernie Ladd, Angelo Mosca, and several others, Bruggers caught the professional wrestling bug and refocused his career. Big Joe Leduc made his Houston Wrestling debut, and quickly found himself in fierce main event action. Steve Strong, a muscular body builder and protégé of Superstar Billy Graham, also became involved in the Houston mat wars, along with the highly regarded "Golden Greek" John Tolos.

When the brand new Astroarena opened its doors in 1975, the Houston Wrestling promotion had the opportunity to find a second home. It was an excellent facility for professional wrestling, and showed great potential as a much-needed backup for those Friday nights when the Sam Houston Coliseum was not available. However, despite a hard push by the Houston Wrestling promotion, the Astroarena could never quite fill the role of a "second home." It was part of the huge Astrodome complex, which included the Astrohall and, more importantly, the Astrodome. When there were other events going on at the complex on the same night as the Houston Wrestling matches, many fans were misdirected and forced to park in lots over a mile away. Rather than face the long walk, some got back in their cars and went home. Frantic attempts by the Houston Wrestling promotion to have the Astrodome complex staff correct their mistakes fell on deaf ears. Additionally, sports fans are creatures of habit, and do not change those habits easily. In spite of these hurdles, Houston Wrestling occasionally promoted a live wrestling show in the facility because there were no other alternatives.

Independence Day fell on a Friday night in 1975, which gave Boesch an extra challenge, since promoting on holidays was precarious. If you promoted on a holiday with an average show, the holiday would kill you

with losses at the box office. On the other hand, if you were able to assemble a great show, the holiday could boost your gate receipts. Houston Wrestling marked that Independence Day with the proven Two-Ring Battle Royal promotion, as well as a new concept, a Two-Ring Six-Man Tag-Team Battle. There was action in both rings simultaneously, with one member from each tag team standing in the middle of the two rings, ready to be tagged into either ring. This creative twist was a crowd-pleaser and became a mainstay during the Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal promotion.

One of the year's highlights was eighteen-year-old Gino Hernandez's debut on Friday, August 1, 1975. Gino was fulfilling his dream of becoming a professional wrestler, just like his stepdad Luis Hernandez. Jose Lothario had already taken Gino under his protective wing and booked him on several professional wrestling tours in Mexico before he turned the legal age of eighteen in this country. Hernandez had several professional wrestling tours under his belt when he appeared in Houston. Since he was a hit with fans, he quickly rose to the top!

Mexico's Ricky Romero also made his debut that year. So did stars like Rick Martel, the heartthrob from Quebec, Stan Hansen, the rugged Texan out of West Texas, and Powerful Tony Atlas, who arrived from Atlanta. The Mongolian Stomper, managed by James J. Dillon, also climbed to main event status. Additonally, there was the debut of High Samoan Chief Peter Maivia, who some of you may be surprised to discover was grandfather to WWE superstar The Rock.

World Heavyweight Champion Jack Brisco made several successful World Title defenses throughout the year against top contenders in the Houston Wrestling area. So did World Junior Heavyweight Champion, Hiro Matsuda from Japan. Other stars who saw action in Houston that year included Japan's Kim Duk, Gordon Nelson, El Gordo, Houstonian J.C. Wingo Jr., Skip Young, Billy Howard, Geoff Portz, Abe Jacobs, Germany's Hans Schroeder, Bruiser Blackwell, Oki Shikina, Scotty Campbell, Paul Pershman, Buddy Wolfe, Gypsy Joe, El Gaucho, Johnny Heidman, and Samoan Tapu, the protégé of Samoan Chief Peter Maivia.

Outside the squared circle, Jack Adkisson, better known as Fritz Von Erich, was elected President of the National Wrestling Alliance when Sam Muchnik stepped down. But there was also tragic news in 1975 as Hall of Famer Jim Londos passed away. A fatal airplane crash on February 28, 1975, killed Bobby Shane and critically injured wrestling manager Gary

Hart. Another airplane crash in the Carolinas broke the backs of wrestlers Bobby Bruggers and Johnny Valentine. Both men would recover, but neither would wrestle again. News of Valentine hit Houston Wrestling fans extremely hard, since they had been watching him in action for nearly twenty-five years. They could not believe they would never see him compete inside the ring again. Valentine returned years later as a manager, but it was still a great loss to Houston Wrestling.

The year finished with a stunning upset when Texan Terry Funk defeated Jack Brisco for the National Wrestling Alliance World Champion Title in Miami, Florida, on December 12, 1975. The belt returned to the Lone Star State. This also marked the first time in professional wrestling history that the belt had been won by two brothers. The famous Funk Family from the Texas panhandle was back on top of the professional wrestling world!

The now-traditional Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal started the next new year, and fans flocked to the Sam Houston Coliseum to watch Andre the Giant and twenty-one other stars battle for the $22,000 prize. Andre the Giant won the pot. Fans also wanted to see who would establish himself as the new number one contender for the World Championship belt

Rocky Johnson made his Houston Wrestling debut on Friday, January 23rd, quickly beating his opponent, then volunteering to substitute for an injured wrestler who was signed to battle the Mongolian Stomper. Despite protests from the Stomper's manager, James J. Dillon, Rocky Johnson defeated the Stomper, shocking fans. Rocky Johnson is also the father of Duane Johnson, who would later break into professional wrestling and become the WWE superstar The Rock.

Johnson went on to win the Texas Heavyweight Championship and became the number one contender for Terry Funk's World Championship belt, which he almost won on several occasions during that year. He also battled members of the Wild Bunch, a group of wrestlers formed to protect World Champion Terry Funk from challengers. The Wild Bunch included Badman Stan Hansen and his brother, former World Champion Dory Funk Jr.

Greg Valentine, no longer known as John Fargo, reentered the Houston ring proudly determined to pick up where his injured father had left off. Greg became a superstar in his own right. Houston fans also saw action from top names like Bob Sweetan, England's Lord Alfred Hayes, the

British tag team of Tony Charles and Les Thornton, Charlie Cook (who starred in football with Grambling and later the Pittsburgh Steelers), German grappler Ziegfried Stanke, and Wildman Moon Dog Mayne, managed by James J. Dillon.

There was also the interesting debut of Chris Taylor, an Olympic medal winner in the wrestling super heavyweight division. Taylor tipped the scales at approximately five hundred pounds and was trained by Verne Gagne, another Olympic wrestler who made it big in professional wrestling. Taylor made an impression on Houston Wrestling fans, but they did not see him again, as he passed away years later because of health problems related to his uncontrollable weight. It was a shame because he was a very nice guy and had tremendous potential.

There was also an intriguing story that year regarding the National Wrestling Alliance World Junior Heavyweight Title. Gino Hernandez wanted that title, and had been selected the NWA Rookie of the Year for 1975. Boesch started negotiations with current World Jr. Heavyweight Champion Hiro Matsuda from Japan. During those talks, Matsuda lost his title to Oklahoma legend Danny Hodge. Unfortunately for Hodge, he was then involved in an auto accident and broke his neck. The National Wrestling Alliance ordered a tournament to fulfill the vacant title. Gino Hernandez defeated former champion Hiro Matsuda, and a couple of months later, beat another former World Junior Heavyweight Champion, Ken Mantell. Hernandez awaited his chance at the National Wrestling Alliance World Junior Heavyweight title.

Dirty Dusty Rhodes also returned to Houston that year as box office sensation “The American Dream.” Though Dusty had wrestled in Houston before, he came back as a changed man as “The American Dream” was unveiled. Houston was also invaded by one of wrestling's most unpredictable stars, The Sheik. He was billed as the most dangerous man in professional wrestling, and had terrorized wrestling fans all around Detroit and the northeast. The Houston Wrestling program of November 19, 1976, called it the wildest debut in recent Houston Wrestling history. The Sheik attacked Rocky Johnson before the opening bell, and split his head open. Johnson could not wrestle and was rushed to a doctor, who used several stitches to stop the bleeding. Johnson won the match on a disqualification. Irate Houston Wrestling fans screamed for justice. The Sheik left little doubt that he was a force to be reckoned with!

In 1976, fans witnessed a “bathtub” match between Boesch and bad guy manager, James J. Dillon. Dillon was the unfortunate one who ended up in the bathtub. They also saw the unique combination of Mexican star Jose Lothario and controversial manager Gary Hart. The alliance was successful in the beginning; however there was the inevitable break up with the usual sequence of feud-settlers afterward. On a sad note, Mrs. Lee Woods passed away in 1976. She had been a secretary to both Morris Sigel and Paul Boesch for many years.

Rounding out the new talent of 1976 were wrestlers like Don Wade, Jerry Stubbs, masked Number One, Francisco Flores, Jan Nelson, Johnny Eagles, Larry Sharpe, El Tornado, El Bracero, Randy Collins, Rasputin, Dan Vurdick, Ted Melbourne, Don Lambert, and the masked “Big O.”

Boesch also purchased his own building that year, and moved the Houston Wrestling ticket office from 2022 San Jacinto a few blocks east, to 1919 Caroline at the corner of Pierce. That was the famous address of the Houston Wrestling ticket office for the next twelve years! Boesch wanted a more flexible work schedule for professional and personal reasons. He wanted me to seriously consider taking over more of the promotion on a full-time basis.

My uncle had hired me as his television assistant when I was eleven, and as I grew older and more mature, he spent time teaching me the professional wrestling business and handing over more responsibilities. He made it clear that there was only three ways to become a professional wrestling promoter. One was to become a professional wrestler, and though I was a champion amateur wrestler, I did not come close to the size requirement to have a career in the ring. A second way was to have a pair of cauliflower ears. I could ask a wrestler to jump off the top turnbuckle, driving his knee full force into my ear, breaking my ear membrane. I could also have someone slam a door on my ear with the same result: a ruptured ear membrane that would fill with blood and puss. The third option was to get a college degree. Thus, I graduated from Sam Houston State University with a Bachelor of Business Administration in 1975, and a Masters of Business Administration in 1976.

My uncle explained that his doctor had informed him that he had a bad heart and would need open heart surgery. He asked me to please take over the business for a year while he had surgery and recuperated. If I covered for him for that long, he would pay for my PhD program, because

he knew I wanted to be a college professor and I had no money. I accepted not because of the financial offer but because I loved and idolized my uncle. After earning the MBA degree, I moved into the Houston Wrestling promotion full time. As it turned out, the doctors treated my uncle with a medication that was able to temporarily solve the heart condition. After one year I approached him with a reminder of his promise to pay for my PHD program. I still aspired to be a college professor.

My uncle told me that he appreciated the way I took over the business and made changes so the promotion was more effective and profitable. He said I was like a son to him, and he was hoping to turn the entire business over to me in the future. Then he asked why I was so determined to get my PhD. I told him that I always wanted to be called Dr. Birkholz. My uncle looked me squarely in the eyes and said, “This is professional wrestling. POOF! You are Dr. Birkholz. Now get your butt back to work!”

I decided to postpone my professorial dreams and make professional wrestling my full-time career for two reasons. First, I had a hard time telling my uncle “No.” Second, I had done serious research and discovered that professional wrestling was ready to explode and become a national phenomenon with the spread of cable television. This was the same conclusion drawn by WWE promoter, Vince McMahon. He planned to take over professional wrestling and develop the business into a worldwide enterprise. I was only interested in riding the upcoming wave of popularity with my uncle, and making serious money so I could fund my PhD.

To start 1977 with the traditional fanfare, Boesch staged the Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal, and added a main event featuring Andre the Giant against the dangerous Sheik. Fans were screaming for someone to stop The Sheik, so Boesch put Andre to the test. He won the match on a disqualification, which left fans hungry for someone to send The Sheik packing.

The Sheik and his huge python packed the Coliseum. Fans were as afraid of the snake as they were of The Sheik. When The Sheik had sent his television promotional tapes a few months earlier, all his interviews involved his pet boa constrictor wrapped around his body. He seemed to be engulfed in fire, so these tapes were extremely effective in igniting fans’ imaginations.

When I met with The Sheik in the dressing room on his first appearance, I asked where his snake was and he explained the airlines

would not let him fly with a live snake. I knew the fans would be disappointed, so I told The Sheik I would do everything I could to make sure there would be a snake for his next appearance. The Sheik thought it was a good idea, but warned me to make sure the snake had been fed. That sounded strange to me, but I quickly discovered that it was easier said than done. I spent several days contacting zoos, pet shops, snake owners and even talent agencies. It is not easy to find someone who is willing to "rent" a fourteen-foot-long (or longer) boa constrictor.

Persistence paid off, and I found a small pet shop whose owners were also wrestling fans. I gave them "an offer they could not refuse": cash, wrestling tickets, and free advertising, in exchange for the use of their snake. They showed up with the boa constrictor that Friday night, and I took them back to the dressing room to introduce them to The Sheik. Before The Sheik touched the boa constrictor, he asked when the snake was last fed. The owners assured him just a day ago, then went back to their seats. My curiosity got the best of me, so I asked The Sheik why the timing was so important. He informed me that if a boa constrictor was hungry, they were more likely to wrap around a human and squeeze him to death. I figured that was something good to know, just like the secret of the wrestling bear. You never know what life has in store for you.

Fans now had the huge boa constrictor to fear along with The Sheik, so every time he approached a section of seats with the snake wrapped around him, fans screamed and ran for safety. Another personal injury attorney's dream come true. Despite the warnings we gave The Sheik, he did it every time. Maybe renting the snake for the Sheik was not such a good idea, especially since its owners raised their "rental" fee every time The Sheik came to town. Boesch and I put the blame on the Texas Wrestling commission, and informed Houston Wrestling fans that they had banned the snake from the arena. Never under estimate the creativity of professional wrestling promoters.

Yet the snakeless Sheik continued to pack the arena, taking on stars like "The American Dream" Dusty Rhodes, former World Champion Dory Funk Jr., and Jose Lothario. Boesch continued to bring in new stars such as Bruiser Brody, who made his Houston Wrestling debut with the newly won U.S.-American championship belt wrapped around his waist. Bruiser had stunned Texas wrestling fans with his shocking upset of Fritz Von Erich for the belt, but he also impressed them with his toughness He later became a

big star at Houston Wrestling and a close friend of mine. Unfortunately, the powerful athlete had a quick temper, which would lead to one of the most tragic professional wrestling stories of the eighties.

The Houston Wrestling program of Friday, February 18, 1977, announced that World Heavyweight Champion Terry Funk had lost his title to Harley Race in Toronto, Canada. This marked the first time in professional wrestling history that a wrestler had won the World Title by defeating two different brothers. Race had defeated Dory Funk Jr. back in 1973, and now defeated his younger brother, Terry. This set up yet another feud. Boesch started booking the new World Champion, knowing Houston Wrestling fans wanted to see someone beat Harley Race and make professional wrestling history in their backyards.

In 1977, Boesch brought in three top stars who did well in Houston but would become even bigger names with Vince McMahon and the WWE in the early eighties: Muhamed Faruk, better know to WWE fans as the Iron Sheik, Big John Studd, and Jimmy Snuka. Joe Bednarski returned to Houston Wrestling without his Polish gimmick and started to promote himself as the new Ivan Putski. Other main event headliners that made their Houston Wrestling debut included Germany's Karl Von Krupp, Ox Baker and his dangerous "heart punch," Japan's Mr. Sakurada, Mexico's Luis Martinez, Abdullah the Butcher managed by James J. Dillon, and Tully Blanchard, son of former Texas champion Joe Blanchard.

One of the premier events of the year was the Houston Wrestling promotion's first show in the beautiful Summit. This was the first professional wrestling show ever promoted on a Sunday in Texas, and the first promoted in the Summit. It was billed as "Super Sunday in the Summit," with the show starting at 3 p.m. and the card jammed with superstars from around the wrestling world and all three major wrestling associations.

The only thing that marred the day was an unfortunate no-show from National Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Champion Harley Race. He had signed to face Terry Funk, but arrived in a taxi just as the Houston Wrestling fans were filing out of the Summit. Fans were disappointed he had not shown, but they did witness the World Champion jumping out of the taxi and running into the Summit. Harley Race claimed that the National Wrestling Alliance had told him it was a night show and that he spent the afternoon in a local motel waiting to go to the Summit. The National

Wrestling Alliance claimed they informed World Champion Harley Race correctly, and he should have been at the Summit on time.

Race ran into the dressing room to apologize to Boesch and me, but the damage had been done. We were furious, we had just spent weeks advertising to millions of fans that World Champion Harley Race would be there. A substitution severely hurts a promotion and the promoters involved. The NWA ordered Race to return to Houston Wrestling as soon as possible, and both the NWA and Race sent tapes explaining to fans what had happened. While these measures helped, they could not prevent all the damage.

The rest of the Super Sunday in the Summit Card went off without a problem, and there was a silver lining to the dark cloud produced by the no-show. American Wrestling Alliance champion Nick Bockwinkel did a super job of substituting for Harley Race against Terry Funk. After he successfully defended his title against Jose Lothario, Bockwinkel came back to battle Funk to a sensational sixty-minute time-limit draw. The show impressed not only Houston Wrestling fans, but fans around the wrestling world. As a result, the Houston Wrestling promotion started booking Bockwinkel. This was good news for Houston Wrestling fans, for Bockwinkel, and for the Houston Wrestling promotion, as you will find out.

Lynn Denton also debuted that year. He was a wrestler who had grown up attending Houston Wrestling matches with his father, Ed Denton. Even as a young boy, he was determined to become a professional wrestler. What makes this story so special is not only that Lynn and his father are both good friends of mine, but that his story was played out in wrestling towns all around the country. For decades, young boys and girls attended the local wrestling matches and dreamed that someday they would be one of the stars in the ring. For hundreds who have that vision, only a few make it. Lynn Denton was one of those special few.

Houston Wrestling also featured newcomers like Skip Young, Hank James, George McCerry, Tank Patton, Randy Brewer, Reno Tuufuli, Carlos Payne, Joe Marin, Randy Colley, Bruce Lankford, Eddy Mansfield, Randy Alls, and Dennis Albert.

Boesch promoted a huge card with five title showdowns on October 21, 1977, as he marked forty-five years in the wrestling business. He was very proud of the fact, and one he wanted to celebrate with friends and fans. One of the stars who signed to be on the Paul Boesch 45th anniversary

show, was former World Champion Terry Funk. A couple of weeks before the event, Terry called and asked me if I would do a special favor for him. He explained that he had just agreed to play a big part in Sylvester Stallone's upcoming movie about nightclub wresting, *Paradise Alley*. I had recently read the book *Paradise Alley*, written by Stallone. I had also heard rumors that there would be a movie, but this was the first time I learned that Terry Funk would have a major part.

Terry explained that he wanted to bring Sylvester Stallone and his staff to the Paul Boesch spectacular since Stallone had never been to a real live professional wrestling show. I informed Terry that would be no problem, and I would set everything up. Already my promoter's blood was pumping with the thought of having Sylvester Stallone in person at the Houston Wrestling show that night, but then came the bombshell from Terry Funk. He said, "This is where the favor comes in, Pete. You cannot tell anybody that Stallone will be there that night." I swallowed hard and promised Terry Funk that I would not say a word.

That vow was the easy part. The hard part was keeping my big promotional mouth shut! I fought the temptation to "leak" the information to millions of Houston Wrestling fans watching the television show that Sylvester Stallone, better known as "Rocky," would be at the matches. As a promoter, I knew that would probably mean a sold-out arena and fantastic publicity. But also as a promoter, I had given Terry Funk my word, and to violate the code of honor would have been unforgivable.

Sure enough, that Friday night, Terry Funk, Sylvester Stallone, and Stallone's traveling entourage came busting through the back door of the Sam Houston Coliseum. Stallone had sunglasses on and a big hat trying to hide his face, but it did not work. It took the Houston Wrestling fans a matter of seconds before they recognized Stallone and started chanting "Rocky! Rocky! Rocky!"

The group made their way into the dressing room. Despite various disguises, every time Stallone tried to sneak out of the dressing room to watch the live matches and get ideas for his upcoming movie, the crowd would start chanting "Rocky! Rocky! Rocky!"

Finally, Stallone gave up and approached me in the dressing room. He asked if I would be kind enough to officially introduce him to the crowd. Of course I agreed, though deep inside I wanted to tell the actor that if he would have given me the green light to spread the word earlier, there would

not only be a sold-out crowd but all kinds of media there publicizing his upcoming movie. Sylvester Stallone escorted Terry Funk to the ring, and it was my pleasure to introduce “Rocky” as Terry Funk’s official second that night. Stallone sat at ringside with Boesch during the telecast of the match. The curious soon-to-be-movie-director got a firsthand look at a great live wrestling show. I will always remember this story as the sold-out crowd that got away. Nevertheless, it was a fun night for the Houston Wrestling promotion, Houston Wrestling fans, and most of all for Sylvester Stallone, who really enjoyed the show!

The Sam Houston Coliseum hosted the annual Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal to start the year, but this particular night included a Six-Man Two- Ring tag team match featuring Fritz Von Erich and his sons David and Kevin, against the team of Killer Brooks, Dutch Mantell, and Playboy Gary Hart. It was the first time in professional wrestling history that a father-and-sons trio would compete in the newly-conceived event. The Von Erichs won, making history.

Germany’s Karl Von Krupp was one of the top “heels” of 1978. He was German and had his own version of the “Iron Claw,” so he was the natural enemy of Fritz Von Erich and his wrestling sons. The rivalry lasted throughout the year. Von Krupp’s invasion also pitted him against stars like Jose Lothario, Wahoo McDaniels, and upcoming star Alberto Madril.

World Title action was another major element, as National Wrestling Alliance World Champion Harley Race found himself in an explosive mat war with Wahoo McDaniels, setting more records on the mat and at the box office. The feud was sustained all year, but in the end, Harley Race remained the World Champion, and Wahoo continued to maintain his number one ranking.

Edward “Wahoo” McDaniel was born on June 19, 1938, in Bernice, Oklahoma. His father, known as “Big Wahoo,”worked in the oil business and moved his family to Midland, Texas, when Edward was young. Even as a child, he possessed great athletic ability. While playing Little League baseball in Midland, one of his baseball coaches was George H.W. Bush. Bush liked Wahoo and followed his professional sports career, just as Wahoo followed his former coach’s political career.

Wahoo was a Choctaw-Chickasaw. His tremendous sports achievements ranked him right up there with other great Native American athletes like Jim Thorpe. Wahoo attended the University of Oklahoma,

where he competed in both football and wrestling. Some of Wahoo's football records still stand there today.

Wahoo went on to play professional football for the Houston Oilers, Denver Broncos, New York Jets and Miami Dolphins. He was an outstanding linebacker and one of the hardest hitters in the game. Wahoo, much like Ernie Ladd, wrestled professionally during the off-season to supplement his salary. He started wrestling for his first trainer, Dory Funk, gaining valuable experience before he came to Houston Wrestling.

Wahoo also excelled in golf and played with greats like Lee Trevino. Trevino tried to talk Wahoo into joining the PGA tour, but Wahoo was making more money in professional wrestling. He was not only a superb athlete, but a great party animal. This drove Oklahoma coach Bud Wilkinson crazy, as well as professional wrestling promoters throughout the country. Even President George H.W. Bush affectionately commented that he never saw anybody burn the candle at both ends like Wahoo did.

Wahoo has been inducted into various professional wrestling Halls of Fame, and also still holds various records in both college and professional football. He passed away on April 18, 2002 while waiting for a donor for a kidney transplant. Houston Wrestling lost one of its greatest superstars, and professional wrestling lost one of its greatest assets.

To this storyteller, Wahoo was more than a superstar. He was a wonderful human being who never refused an opportunity to help anybody, especially his loyal fans. You have read about his kind heart and how he graciously gave back to the community. The Indian Chief was always thankful for his millions of fans who supported him so that he could spend his life competing in the business that he loved so much. I, too, was a big fan of the "free spirit" Wahoo, and at times we were partners in different professional wrestling promotions around Texas. I will always appreciate what he did for Houston Wrestling and my career. More than anything, he was a close, dear friend. May the Lord be with you, Wahoo.

One of the most unique aspects of the 1978 season was the appearance of many sons of famous professional wrestlers, including David and Kevin Von Erich, AWA champion Nick Bockwinkel, Jake Roberts, Berry Orton, Mando Guerrero, and Houstonians Tiger Conway Jr. and Gino Hernandez. Later in the year, David Von Erich made professional wrestling history by winning the Texas Heavyweight championship, since he and his father Fritz were the first father and son duo to hold the very prestigious

title. That record did not last long, because a few weeks later Gino Hernandez upset David Von Erich, which made him and his stepfather, Luis Hernandez, the second such team to hold the Texas title.

In addition to the times that NWA World Champion Harley Race came to Houston, there were several appearances by American Wrestling Alliance World Champion Nick Bockwinkel. Bockwinkel, with his coveted belt, was the focal point of some of the year's best action. Superstar Billy Graham, who had upset Bruno Sammartino for the WWF Championship belt, also made a couple of appearances in the Houston Wrestling ring that year.

There were also some returning crowd favorites, stars like Boris Malenko, Pepper Gomez and even Johnny Valentine. Valentine was paralyzed from the waist down; however his love for the business brought him back as a manager. Fans were glad to see him and gave him a standing ovation the first time he came back to the Houston Wrestling ring.

The biggest show of the year was promoted as another "Super Sunday in the Summit," and took place on Sunday, May 28, 1978. The card included the NWA World Champion Harley Race against Wahoo McDaniels, AWA World Champion Nick Bockwinkel against Jose Lothario, World Women's Champion The Fabulous Moolah against Wenona Littleheart, WWF top star Superstar Billy Graham against Ivan Putski, Southern States champion Dick Slater against Alberto Madril, and many other top stars. It was one of the largest professional wrestling crowds to ever come to the Summit.

Bruiser Brody was another main event star in 1978. He had been to Houston Wrestling the year before, but could not get along with Boesch. Brody was a tremendous talent--impressive, rugged, and savage. He had all the ingredients of a professional wrestling superstar, but unfortunately he also had an explosive temper. Promoters and wrestlers occasionally had a hard time getting along with him.

After sitting out of professional wrestling briefly, he asked me for a second chance. I went to bat for Brody and convinced my uncle to let him try once more. He became a big star for Houston Wrestling, and I never had any trouble with Brody when I worked with him at Houston Wrestling and in other towns I promoted in the early eighties. In fact, he was my Golden Triangle Champion and a tremendous help in my efforts to bring professional wrestling back to Port Arthur and Beaumont on a consistent

basis. Brody and I became very good friends. I still remember the night when my wife and I decided to visit the French Quarter after a big show in the Superdome in New Orleans. It was a Saturday, and things were pretty wild! Brody spotted us, quickly made his way over, and told me to stay close so he could watch over us. Bruiser did not have to make the offer twice. I thanked him, and believe me, we did stay close. Bruiser Brody made a wonderful bodyguard.

The professional wrestling business, like any other, can get rough and dangerous. There was always the possibility of a personal conflict between wrestlers, or with a wrestler and a promoter. The best course of action was to stay calm and make a point to not work together in the future. Keep your cool, politely shake hands, and allow both parties go their separate ways.

But some individuals cannot do that. Tragically, Bruiser Brody and wrestler Jose Gonzalez of Puerto Rico were two of them. On July 16, 1988, the men got into an argument in the locker room in a wrestling arena in Puerto Rico. No one knows for sure what the argument was about, but it turned fatal. Fellow wrestler Tony Atlas heard the commotion and ran to the shower just in time to see Brody bent over and holding his stomach as Gonzalez stood there with a knife. Brody was rushed to the hospital, but it was too late. Bruiser could not be saved. Gonzalez was charged with murder, but was later acquitted as he claimed self-defense. The professional wrestling world once again lost one of its big stars, and I once again lost a very good friend.

One day in late August while I was working in the office at 1919 Caroline, I was told there was a man in the lobby who wanted to talk to me. I stepped outside and was met by a very tall black man who extended his huge right hand. I could not help but notice how big his hand was as I shook it. He looked familiar, but I could not remember his name. After finding a seat in my office, he smiled his friendly smile and I immediately remembered who he was--“Big Cat” Cleveland Williams, one of boxing’s greatest stars in the fifties and sixties. The last time I saw Cleveland Williams in person was when he battled Muhammad Ali for the world boxing title in the Astrodome in Houston, Texas, on November 14, 1966, in front of over thirty five thousand boxing fans. I still remember that day because I was with my uncle Paul Boesch and Wild Bull Curry, who had been a professional boxer before turning his focus to professional wrestling.

As I looked across my desk, I noticed the friendly smile was the same, but not the impressive physique that the “Big Cat” once had. Cleveland Williams asked me for help. He had no money and wanted to become a professional wrestler. This was not the first time a discarded professional boxer came to professional wrestling for help. I wanted to do something for him. However, he had no wrestling experience, and at his age and current physical condition, becoming a professional wrestler was not an option. The disappointed look on his face was hard for me to take. As a teenager, I was one of the thousands of fans cheering the “Big Cat” on in the Astrodome, hoping that he would pull the big upset over legendary Muhammad Ali.

I couldn't bear to see him helpless, so I asked Cleveland Williams if he would be willing to be a special referee. He told me he would do anything to make some money. I knew the next step was to determine whether Cleveland Williams would be willing to “do business” and cooperate with the wrestlers and promotion so everybody could give the wrestling fans their money’s worth. The “Big Cat” said he would do whatever he was told, and explained there was not a dime’s difference between boxing and wrestling. The name of the game was putting on a good show. I was trying to find a delicate way of asking the former boxing great if he could “pull” a punch, make it look like he really punched somebody when in reality he would barely touch them. Cleveland Williams looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Mr. Pete, I can pull a punch!”

I told him I would see what I could do. I could tell he needed money, so I opened my wallet and gave him $200 in cash as advancement. He smiled as he shook my hand and expressed his gratitude. Now the pressure was on me to create the situation that would warrant having “Big Cat” Williams as a special referee. The promoter had to create the right situation, or it wouldn’t appeal to wrestling fans. However, the right scenario would catch fans’ imaginations and send box office receipts through the roof!

At this time, the feud between Jose Lothario and Gino Hernandez was red hot. The two Houston Wrestling stars continued to draw big gates, but to have Cleveland Williams referee their wrestling match did not make sense. My creative juices started to flow. I told “Big Cat” Williams I would need a little time to set the proper scenario for him to be a “special” referee. Lothario was known as “Supersock” Jose Lothario, and fans knew that he had a lot of experience in boxing as well as in wrestling. I had Jose Lothario

get on television and challenge Gino Hernandez to a battle to a finish where the use of fists would be legal. The cocky Hernandez accepted the challenge. I had to be careful because I had a license with the State of Texas to promote professional wrestling, but not professional boxing. It could not be a boxing match--it had to be a wrestling match with both men wearing karate gloves with the use of fists being legal.

The final touch was to convince wrestling fans that no regular professional wrestling referee would be able to keep this vicious showdown under control. I was able to do that by having the regular wrestling referees publicly refuse to be involved because it would be too dangerous and their personal safety would be at stake. The stage had been set. One of the wildest feuds in recent Houston Wrestling history would come down to a battle to the finish with the use of fists being legal. I then got on the Houston Wrestling television show and told fans that there was only one man big enough, tough enough, and brave enough to referee the dangerous battle, and that was “Big Cat” Cleveland Williams, one of the greatest boxers in the world.

Jose Lothario and Gino Hernandez produced some great television interviews leading up to the showdown. In fact, Gino added icing to the cake by claiming that if “Big Cat” Cleveland Williams stuck his big nose into the battle, he would personally “knock him out.” Talk about igniting wrestling fans' imaginations! They were fired up and demanding the showdown, and the fact that Cleveland Williams was going to be the special referee fit perfectly into my story, adding fuel to the raging rivalry between Lothario and Gino. A huge crowd came to the Sam Houston Coliseum on September 29th, 1978. The behind-the-scenes strategy had paid off at the box office. Now, came the challenge of deciding what would happen in the ring.

As I said before, fans seeing Cleveland Williams referee would not be enough. They had to witness the “Big Cat” in action. I suggested that we use the classic finish where the manager, in this case Playboy Gary Hart, would keep interfering in the match until the special referee had enough. Then Cleveland Williams would “deck” Playboy Gary Hart, distracting Hernandez, and giving Jose Lothario the opportunity to “knock out” Hernandez. The fact that crowd favorite Jose Lothario wins the match is important, so the special referee is called a “hero.”

This Cinderella-type finish required two important elements. First, Cleveland Williams would have to effectively “pull” his punch against Gary Hart, and Gary Hart would have to trust both Cleveland Williams and me enough to leave himself wide open for the pulled punch. In the dressing room that night, I continued to remind Cleveland Williams to be sure to pull the punch. Anxious Playboy Gary Hart also kept reminding him to do the same. Several times that night, Gary Hart cornered me and expressed his concerns. Keep in mind for this to work, Gary Hart would have to leave himself vulnerable to one of the hardest-hitting athletes in the world. Hart and I were both nervous.

The much-anticipated showdown would be the final event of the evening. Both Lothario and Hernandez made their way through the enthusiastic crowd to the ring, and fans went wild when “Big Cat” Cleveland Williams was introduced. You could feel the excitement in the air as the bell sounded and the battle began. Jose and Gino were classically explosive, and Playboy Gary Hart kept trying to interfere in the match. This of course made Cleveland Williams mad, and on several occasions he jumped into his boxing stance. When he did that, the crowd went wild screaming for “Big Cat” to hit him! Finally, it was time to end the match. Gary Hart jumped into the wrestling ring. Cleveland Williams hauled off with his extremely powerful right hand and clobbered Hart! The helpless Hart went down like a ton of bricks and the crowd exploded. I was shocked. I had witnessed hundreds of pulled punches, and that had not been one of them!

I was furious and could not believe that Cleveland Williams had double-crossed me. Gary Hart had trusted me. I had put one of my “boys” in an extremely dangerous situation and now he was hurt. I was fuming as I rushed back to the dressing room, ready to confront Cleveland Williams and his dangerous right punch. I knew he would probably deck me too, but that would be nothing compared to the damage to my reputation in the professional wrestling business if I did not stick up for one of my “boys.” I was willing to pay for my mistake, so enraged that when I got to the dressing room, I ripped off my coat and tie. I am not sure whether I really thought I could last two seconds against Cleveland Williams, or if I was more concerned about getting blood on my coat (my blood on my coat...)! All I knew was that I was ready to fight anybody, even Cleveland Williams.

I paced back and forth, waiting for Williams. The dressing room door flew open and in came the medics, carrying the bleeding Gary Hart who was screaming in pain. As the medics left Cleveland Williams walked in and I stormed across the dressing room. All of the sudden, Gary Hart jumped up with a big smile on his face. Hart reached out and shook Cleveland Williams hand, congratulating him on a perfect pulled punch. I froze. Cleveland saw me coming and knew by the angry look in my eyes that even with my experience watching pulled punches, I was fooled. The "Big Cat" smiled, shook my hand, and said, "I told you, Mr. Pete, I can pull a punch!"

As I write this story, I am so thankful to the Lord that Gary Hart was not hurt, and also that I did not have to challenge Cleveland Williams. There is no doubt in my mind that if such a confrontation would have taken place that night, it would not have been a pretty sight. Thank you, Lord.

The entire year of 1978 was full of surprises that kept Houston Wrestling fans on the edge of their seats and the Houston Wrestling promotion on its toes!

1979 was off to an awkward start for Houston Wrestling because the Sam Houston Coliseum was not available for numerous dates during the first two months of the year. The Gulf Athletic Club Inc., the official promoter of Houston Wrestling, had a five-year lease agreement for the venue with the City of Houston. It was a good lease for the city because the Gulf Athletic Club used the Coliseum every Friday night the city could not lease to other events. In return, it was a good lease for Houston Wrestling because the promotion was first in line for all available Friday nights

We had to support fans' "Friday night habit" and provide fresh Houston Wrestling action on the television show, so we needed a weekly promotion. Our strategy to deal with this latest challenge was to promote a couple of shows in the Summit and have a rare Sunday afternoon promotion in the Sam Houston Coliseum. That is why the 1979 season started with a huge card in the Summit on Sunday, January 7, 1979. It was billed as another "Super Sunday in the Summit." The main event featured World Heavyweight Champion Harley Race against the "Eighth Wonder of the World," Andre the Giant. The Giant was always gracious enough to help the Houston Wrestling promotion start off the new year by giving the promotion his first Friday night booking each year. That was the cornerstone of the traditional Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Man Battle

Royal. Since the Coliseum was not available, and logistically the two rings could not be set up at the Summit, Boesch still used his booking date with Andre the Giant to maximum effect with the Wold Title showdown. The fact of the matter is that Andre the Giant could make more money traveling around the world and wrestling than he could if he was limited to bookings defending a World Title. The Giant liked being the "Giant," which was good news for Harley Race, who liked being "The World Champion."

The card also had The Fabulous Moolah defending her World Title against top-ranked Vicki Williams, while the Funk brothers, Dory Jr. and Terry, took on Mexican sensations Mil Mascaras and Jose Lothario. Dusty Rhodes battled Maniac Mark Lewin in a showdown for the Brass Knucks Title. The supporting card featured Gino Hernandez against Ox Baker, Superstar Billy Graham against Tiger Conway Jr,. and Apache Bull Ramos against Nick Kozak in the opener.

Houston Wrestling did return to the Sam Houston Coliseum for one Friday night in January as fans witnessed a showdown between Gino Hernandez and Jose Lothario in a Texas Death Match inside the steel cage. That night also featured the reappearance of The Spoiler, and the announcement that wrestling would return to Galveston Texas on Thursday, January 25th,' in the Moody Civic Center. This event was a big success--good news for wrestling fans in the beach resort, and great news for me, since it was my first solo wrestling promotion.

Boesch was a great mentor for many years and I learned so much from him. Although I had more and more responsibility with the Houston Wrestling promotion, the time had come to enhance my education and experience by promoting shows on my own. Opening up secondary markets around Houston was a great way for me to keep learning first hand the trials and tribulations of a professional wrestling promoter. Please note that most of these "added" wrestling promotions were on either Thursday or Saturday nights. It was a major advantage for a young promoter like me to "piggy back" these promotions with the Houston Wrestling promotion. It would have been difficult to attract top names to these promotions, had I not been able to combine the booking with a solid booking at Houston Wrestling that Friday. In fact, booking Galveston on Thursday night worked very well with many of the wrestlers since they were able to work Galveston on Thursday, and then spend Friday on the beach before heading into Houston.

Other interesting developments in Houston Wrestling included the opportunity for Tiger Conway Sr. to team with his son Tiger Jr., a rising star in the business. Houstonian Mike the Big 'Un also got his professional start at Houston Wrestling. Mike, who weighed over 650 pounds, was a cartoon-type character who came to life inside the Houston Wrestling ring, much like Big Humphrey had done years ago. Boesch signed "A Meeting of Maniacs" as Maniac Mark Lewin faced The Sheik. There were few wrestling holds in this thriller, as both men used everything they could get their hands on to punish each other. The masked Mexican star El Halcon also debuted, creating more "angles" for the explosive feud between Jose Lothario and Gino Hernandez. That feud would just not die.

While all of this was taking place, fans enjoyed action provided by Wahoo McDaniel, Greg Valentine, the Von Erich brothers (David, Kerry and Kevin), The Spoiler, Maniac Mark Lewin, Dusty Rhodes, Mil Mascaras, Jose Lothario, Gino Hernandez, Tiger Conway Jr., Harley Race, Terry Funk, Ox Baker, Bruiser Brody, and Houston favorite Pepper Gomez. Former World Champion Jack Brisco returned several times that year. Fans held a special spot in their hearts for him since he'd won the World Title in the Houston Wrestling ring on July 20, 1973. American Wrestling Alliance World Champion Nick Bockwinkel was another 1979 action producer. He successfully defended his AWA title on several occasions. The return of El Gran Markus was another exciting addition to Lothario and Hernandez's feud.

Former National Football League defensive lineman Ernie Holmes also debuted that year. NFL football fans will remember him as one of the members of the famous "Iron Curtain" during the dynasty years of the World Champion Pittsburgh Steelers in the early seventies. Ernie shaved his head in the shape of an arrowhead, which quickly became his trademark in the NFL and also the focal point of numerous comments by well-known sportscaster Howard Cosell on *Monday Night Football*. I did everything I could to help Holmes make it into professional wrestling. He had the big name and was a great athlete, but unfortunately it was not meant to be. Ernie never caught on with the fans, and that was a shame since I thought he was a great guy. Holmes was tragically killed in an auto accident on January 17, 2008, just outside of Beaumont Texas. At the time of his death, Ernie Holmes was a minister serving the Lord.

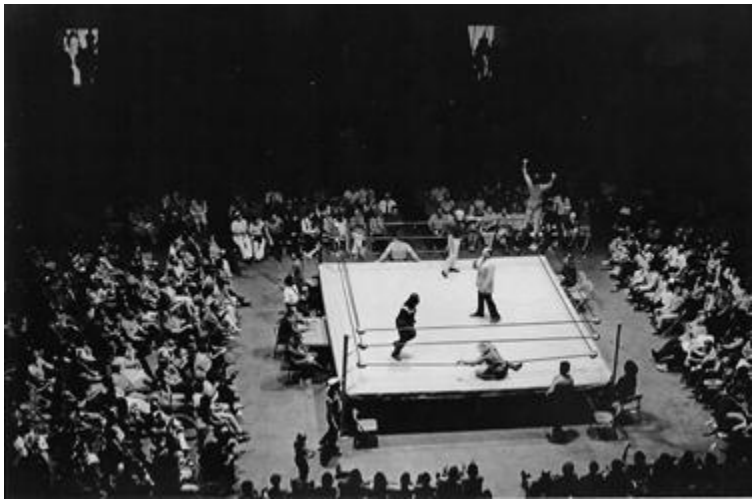
In addition to the stars already mentioned, fans witnessed the return of Olympian star Ken Patera. As a result of the many world records he set in weightlifting, promoters billed him as the world's strongest human. Patera loved to lift weights and stay in top shape. I often picked him up at the airport and drove straight to Houston's Downtown YMCA. I made arrangements for him to work out using their well-equipped facility before he wrestled on the night of his return. Members of the Downtown YMCA welcomed an opportunity, as I did, to work out with a former Olympian and world record holder.

One day, a power lifter showing off in front of his fellow power lifters challenged Ken Patera to a weightlifting contest. Patera politely declined and mentioned that he was wrestling that night and had to be careful not to be too worn out for his match. The arrogant jerk called Patera a "chicken." I remember watching Patera become angry and issue a challenge back. He mentioned that he would be in town the next morning and would gladly compete in a weightlifting contest, but he wanted to make it worth his while. Patera said that both men should put ten thousand dollars cash on the line in a winner-take-all contest. Much to the disappointment of the witnesses, Ken Patera, and myself, the man did not answer the challenge. This is another example of the many times that wrestlers were challenged in a bar, on the street, or in the gym. They were always at a disadvantage because they were in a "no win" situation. Even if they won the confrontation, too many times they faced a lawsuit afterward.

Sugar Bear Harris made his Houston Wrestling debut that year. The popular black star was well-liked by Houston Wrestling fans, and returned a few years later as the dangerous "Ugandan Giant Kamala." Harris made even more money as the feared Kamala than he did as the popular Sugar Bear Harris.

Sylvester Ritter, better known as the Junkyard Dog, made his debut on the last card of the year. He approached me in the locker room of the Superdome in New Orleans and said he wanted to work for Houston Wrestling. I was there to witness firsthand the crowd of nearly forty thousand fans, drawn to the Superdome by Promoter Bill Watts featuring stars like Sylvester Ritter. I agreed to give him an opportunity, and boy was I glad I did! The Junkyard Dog would later become a huge star at Houston Wrestling, and with Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation.

1979 was another record-breaking year, and a great way for Houston Wrestling to finish the decade as Houston climbed back to the top as one of the biggest and best wrestling towns in the business!



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from *Friday Night in the Coliseum*

THE EVOLUTIONARY EIGHTIES

Much to the delight of the Houston Wrestling fans, the traditional Twenty-Two-Man Two- Ring Battle Royal started the year with a bang. The two-ring setup allowed the promotion to add hundreds of extra ringside seats, and it made every seat in the Coliseum a great one. This, along with raised ticket prices, made this event very successful at the box office. Having two rings also allowed the promotion to feature the annual two-ring six-man tag team battle, always a big favorite of Houston Wrestling fans!

There were a couple noteworthy debuts on January 4, 1980. One was Tom Prichard, who was no stranger to fans because he was my protégé for years. My duties and responsibilities with Houston Wrestling had been growing for years. Prichard was a young teenager who took over my former responsibilities, beginning with the job of Assistant Television Director of the Houston Wrestling show. It was exciting to watch Tom fulfill his professional wrestling dreams, since so many of us watched him grow up. When Tom launched his career, his younger brother Bruce became the new assistant. Both Tom and Bruce would go on to have careers with the WWE.

Manager James J. Dillon returned that same night with his newly-signed Japanese team of Mr. Hito and Mr. Sakurada. They found themselves surrounded by other great tag teams like Gino Hernandez and El Gran Markus, Jose Lothario and Mil Mascaras, the Von Erich brothers, the Twin Devils from Mexico, and the Funk Brothers.

One of the most exciting moments of 1980 was the debut of “Mr. USA” Tony Atlas, a good-looking black athlete with a tremendous physique. He was one of those rare athletes who, like Superstar Billy Graham before him, was both a body builder and a professional wrestler. He was chosen “Mr. USA” in one body building competition and carried that title into his professional wrestling career. Tony Atlas was a superstar

on *World Championship Wrestling*, a television show aired in Houston on Ted Turner's Superstation out of Atlanta, Georgia. Atlas was a tremendous hit with the Houston Wrestling fans, which served as a wake-up call to the Houston Wrestling promotion--we began to book more talent from the Atlanta office. In the ring, Tony Atlas became the number one contender to Harley Race's World Championship belt. Fans enjoyed showdowns between World Champion Harley Race and "Mr. USA" Tony Atlas throughout 1980, which were responsible for some of the year's biggest gates.

New stars from all over the wrestling world came to Houston, including WWF superstar Bruno Sammartino, Britain's Lord Alfred Hayes, Russian Ivan Koloff, South Korean Pak Song Nam, Stan "Heart Punch" Stasiak, Mexican star Sicodelico (younger brother of Mil Mascaras), and World's Junior Heavyweight Champion Les Thornton from Great Britain. Other newcomers included Australia's Jonathon Boyd, Rick Oliver, Jerry Brown, Ted Heath, Bulldog Brower, Brian Blair, and the colorful Bugsy McGraw.

Boesch was also able to sign a showdown featuring two of the World Wrestling Federation's biggest superstars, Bruno Sammartino and Superstar Billy Graham. Graham had upset Bruno Sammartino in Madison Square Garden for the WWF championship, so fans around the country wanted to see Bruno Sammartino regain his championship belt from the "Superstar."

Boesch had a close personal working relationship with Vince McMahon Sr., founder of the World Wrestling Federation and the father of Vince McMahon Jr. In fact, Paul had wrestled for Vince McMahon Sr.'s father and Vince Jr.'s grandfather back in the thirties. Vince McMahon Jr. was a third generation wrestling promoter and grew up in a professional wrestling family. That friendship allowed Boesch to bring various WWF stars to Houston Wrestling.

Houston Wrestling promoted a show in Pasadena that year at the new Pasadena Rodeo Grounds. The promotion was a test for the Pasadena market because plans were underway to build a new Pasadena Civic Center, which could have been a new market for Houston Wrestling. By this time, I was promoting in numerous markets surrounding Houston, including Beaumont, Port Arthur, Galveston, Angleton, Rosenberg, Cleveland, Conroe and other towns where fans could watch the Houston Wrestling television show.

Boesch had entered a semi-retirement, and felt these promotions were a great way for me to continue my education in promoting professional wrestling. It also was a wonderful way for me to be involved in numerous events and stories.

One night in the Houston Wrestling dressing room, former World Champion Lou Thesz came up to me and asked if I had something against him. The remark stunned me because I had the greatest respect for Mr. Thesz, and I quickly assured him that I did not have anything against him. He then asked why I did not book him on the "special" shows I was promoting around Houston. Honestly, I did not think he would want to work the smaller markets. I told him I would be honored to have him work on one of my promotions, so we grabbed our calendars and I booked him for my next promotion in the Port Arthur Civic Center. Thesz was no longer wrestling, but he made a wonderful special referee because fans would buy tickets just to see him.

That night, at the Port Arthur Civic Center, I had just finished broadcasting on radio station KPAC when a concerned Nick Kozak approached me. Kozak said I had a big problem in the dressing room and when I asked Nick what the problem was, he threw up his hands in a gesture that let me know that he did not want to be involved.

As I walked to the dressing room, my mind was busily trying to determine what the problem could be. I knew one of the wrestlers was having travel difficulties and would probably not make the show. However, I had already decided how I was going to handle the substitution issue.

When I walked into the room, every single wrestler swiveled to stare at me, their expressions asking, "Ok, young snot-nosed promoter, what are you going to do now?" I glanced over to the far corner of the dressing room. Legendary Lou Thesz was changing out of his referee's uniform and putting on his wrestling tights!

Thesz had retired from wrestling because of his age, and now I was facing a serious challenge. How was this twenty-nine-year-old promoter going to tell the legendary Thesz that he could not wrestle? I slowly walked towards Thesz, desperately searching for the right words to say.

I finally asked, "Mr. Thesz, what are you doing?" Thesz understood the delicate situation and without hesitation he told me I needed a substitute and he would consider it an honor if I would let him wrestle on my card. The way Thesz said it changed the situation entirely. I was no longer

making a business decision; Thesz had made a respectful request that he knew I would not turn down. I told Thesz he did not have to wrestle, however, he said he was doing it for me. There was no way I was going to tell one of the greatest wrestlers of all times that he could not get in the ring and wrestle.

It just so happened that the record-setting crowd that night included several hundred fans from around the country. They were there because the International Fan Convention was taking place in Houston that weekend. All those fans came in early so that they could attend the wrestling matches in Port Arthur and extend the convention into a four-day event. When these knowledgeable fans recognized Thesz coming down the aisle dressed in his wrestling tights, they gave the legend a standing ovation. Many had never seen Thesz wrestle, and they realized the man they had read so much about was going to step inside the ring and make professional wrestling history.

Ironically, Thesz was wrestling Kelly Kiniski, the son of former World Champion Gene Kiniski. Remember that Gene Kiniski had defeated Thesz for the world title decades ago. After the upset, Thesz and Gene Kiniski were involved in a fierce rivalry, which produced savage showdowns from coast to coast.

The crowd cheered as they watched Thesz soundly whip Kelly Kiniski. I, too, watched in amazement. I had seen Thesz in action before, but that was when I was just a kid and he was in his prime. He was indeed a true legend of the sport. Now he was much older, but the well-conditioned Thesz had what it took to be a champion. When Thesz pinned Kelly, the crowd again erupted with a standing ovation. As I witnessed the entire extraordinary event, I was so glad that I had kept my big mouth shut and let Thesz do the talking.

While I drove home that night, my mind was still spinning from the excitement. The realization of what just took place was finally starting to sink in. I had made a lot of money because of the record-setting crowd, but most importantly, Lou Thesz worked in one of my shows. I took a deep breath and thought, “Life is good!”

Kelly Kiniski later told me that he called his dad from the motel that night, and said that he had just wrestled Lou Thesz. His dad told him, “Son, take a couple of pain pills and don’t worry. It will stop hurting in about a month.” Thesz was indeed that tough, as Gene Kiniski knew all too well. Now his son knew the painful truth as well.

The biggest story of 1980 was the critical challenges facing the Houston Wrestling promotion, and all other regional promotions throughout the country. The winds of change were blowing, and even Houston Wrestling was starting to bend from the gale force.

It was becoming more difficult to secure talent as Vince McMahon Jr. entered the early stages of his strategy to take his New York-based WWF wrestling organization nationwide. The Houston Wrestling office had always been able to book top talent on its own merit, but that was changing. At the same time, Southwest Sports Inc.--the booking office located in Dallas and owned by Fritz Von Erich--was was no longer the dependable booking office it had been for many years.

Vince McMahon Jr. was securing the business's top stars and forcing them to sign long-term exclusive personal services contracts. This, along with the Dallas booking office's troubles, made it more difficult for the Houston Wrestling promotion to attract the top stars fans demanded if they were going to maintain their Friday night habit.

The Houston Wrestling promotion was also facing the challenge of maintaining the high television ratings they had produced back in the seventies. This decline, along with a new management team at KHTV Channel 39 that did not understand the professional wrestling television market, led to Channel 39 dropping *Houston Wrestling*'s Sunday morning airing. The management team assumed that by dropping the Sunday morning program, (a repeat of the Saturday night program), Saturday night's ratings would double. They did not understand that we were reaching an entirely different audience with the Sunday morning telecast. Years later, Channel 39 realized their mistake and brought the Sunday morning show back on the air. In the meantime, the Houston Wrestling promotion had to adjust to the decrease in its television viewing audience. Channel 39 did give the Houston Wrestling promotion a one-hour time slot on late Monday night; however, it was not the same.

The promotion did air *The Best of Texas Wrestling*, a syndicated television show that I encouraged Paul Boesch to produce with me. I thought it would be a great way to use the hundreds of hours of Houston Wrestling action he and I were collecting. This show had some success with worldwide syndication. It could have been more successful, but, due to circumstances beyond our control, its growth was limited.

We informed Houston Wrestling fans in the arena wrestling program and on the television show that drastic change was coming to Houston Wrestling!

These changes began on Friday, January 2, 1981. The traditional Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal was the final event that night. Houston Wrestling fans were shocked to see a whole new stable of top wrestling stars. The Houston Wrestling promotion had officially changed booking offices, leaving the Dallas booking office run by Fritz Von Erich, and hiring the Southwest Championship Wrestling booking office operated by Joe and Tully Blanchard.

The Dallas booking office and the Houston Wrestling promotion had been working together for decades, even when the late Morris Sigel was promoting Houston Wrestling. This shocking political move was one of many shifts throughout the wrestling world. Vince McMahon Jr. was becoming the “Genghis Khan” of regional promotions as he swept across the nation, rampaging regional promotions and leaving a trail of ravished territories.

Vince McMahon Jr. not only did a great job of grabbing top wrestling talent from the regional promotions, he was smart enough to lure away top organizational talent. These promoters were able to bring all the necessary media, arena, and promotional connections to his business.

Vince McMahon Jr. started a professional wrestling revolution, but whether it was good or bad for the future of professional wrestling will be a topic of discussion for many years. I saw it coming, and yet like so many revolutions there was very little regional promoters like myself could do to stop it. Boesch and I developed a strategy to make our Houston Wrestling promotion as strong as possible, and did our best to ride out the savage promotional storm. That was one of the major reasons why changing booking offices was so critical. It was a huge risk at a very precarious time in the business. Were we going to be successful, or fall to the Genghis Khan of professional wrestling?

Our decision was an immediate success. We could secure top talent for future shows. Houston fans were elated to see returning superstars like Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel, Mil Mascaras, Bruiser Brody, “Polish Power” Ivan Putski, Chavo Guerrero, and the World Tag Team Champions Dory Jr. and Terry Funk. These stars were proven box office attractions, and proven action producers in the ring.

Southwest Championship Wrestling not only made these stars available, but the new booking office also furnished new enthusiasm and commitment to the Houston Wrestling promotion. The move allowed the Houston Wrestling promotion to use Chief Wahoo McDaniel as a first-class booker, since he worked as hard at being an outstanding booker as he did being an outstanding competitor.

The Houston Wrestling office honored their contractual commitments to book the National Wrestling Alliance World Champion, Harley Race. The promotion also fulfilled its contractual commitments to all other top wrestling talent that had been booked several months in advance. Boesch and I felt the promotion had a new lease on life, but how long would the lease last?

The tremendous talent that came with our shocking move included Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel, Gino Hernandez, Chavo Guerrero, Ivan Putski, Tully Blanchard, Tony Atlas, Ernie Ladd, Mil Mascaras, Tiger Conway Jr., Scott Casey, Tank Patton, Dick Slater, the Funk brothers Terry and Dory Jr., and American Wrestling Alliance World Champion, Nick Bockwinkel. The creative juices flowed as Boesch and I went to work creating new feuds and revitalizing bitter rivalries. The promotion felt the pressure not only of pleasing Houston Wrestling fans, but proving to the professional wrestling business that changing booking offices was the right move.

The promotion worked hard outside the ring while the fresh talent worked hard inside the ring. The results were quite rewarding. Box office receipts began to rise and so did the critical television ratings. The Houston Wrestling promotion regained the all-important Sunday morning television time slot thanks to the rise in viewership, as well as the fact that the promotion could provide a completely different television show for Sunday morning: The Houston Edition of *Southwest Championship Wrestling*. Boesch and I took turns traveling to San Antonio every week to tape that show. We added our own voice-overs to the show as it was being produced, which allowed us to add local Houston Wrestling flavor and promote upcoming shows with our own commentary. The formula was successful and attendance continued to rise. Just as we gained box office and television momentum, the vicious curveball came!

The Houston Wrestling promotion advertised that NWA World Champion Harley Race would defend his title and belt against Tony Atlas in

the Sam Houston Coliseum on Friday, April 17th. The NWA had honored their contractual commitments in regards to Race for the first few months of the year, and did not give any indication that this would change. But then the bombshell. World Champion Harley Race did not show.

Was it a double-cross by the National Wrestling Alliance to punish the Houston Wrestling promotion for severing their ties with the Dallas Booking office and Fritz Von Erich? Von Erich had been President of the National Wrestling Alliance and still had strong connections to the NWA. Was it a double-cross by World Champion Harley Race? He may have been pressured not only by the NWA, but other wrestling promoters who wanted to see the "defiant" Houston Wrestling promotion fail.

As I write this story , I remember the scene in the dressing room vividly. As I have mentioned, nothing hurts a professional wrestling promotion more than a substitution, especially a substitution for the World Champion. Something had to be done immediately for the eight thousand fans in attendance that night. An irate and embarrassed Boesch personally took the undesirable job of announcing the substitution to the Houston Wrestling crowd. Everyone was silent. You could literally hear a pin drop.

Then Boesch quickly informed the crowd that Houston Wrestling promotion was going to officially resign from the National Wrestling Alliance and would no longer recognize their champion, Harley Race, as the World Heavyweight Champion. He said they would now witness a one-night tournament to crown a new World Heavyweight Champion who would be recognized not only in Houston, but in various territories throughout the country. The Houston Wrestling crowd erupted with a roar of approval. They recognized the courage it took to stand up to the National Wrestling Alliance and for what was right. Fans not only respected that, but were excited. They were going to witness professional wrestling history and be a vital part of it!

Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel was the winner of the seven-match one-night tournament, with impressive wins over Gino Hernandez and two former NWA World Champions, Terry Funk and Dory Funk Jr. Eight thousand plus Houston Wrestling fans went home satisfied. The promotion offered fans in attendance an immediate refund if they went to the box office and requested their money back, but only twenty-eight did. I wonder how many regretted it after they heard of the action and excitement the tournament provided to those who stayed.

The rupture between the Houston Wrestling promotion and the National Wrestling Alliance was indeed shocking. The late Morris Sigel had been an integral part of the NWA in 1949, some thirty-two years earlier. The Houston Wrestling promotion had been a supportive member of the NWA all that time.

After the dust had settled, the newly-crowned World Champion Wahoo McDaniel relinquished his title to become the number one challenger to American Wrestling Alliance champion Nick Bockwinkel. It was a very classy move by Wahoo McDaniel. Many promoters applauded it, since it unified additional wrestling promotions and helped to rally them behind Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Alliance. Bockwinkel immediately started to defend his AWA World Championship belt in Houston and proved to be one of the greatest World Champions to ever step inside the Houston Wrestling ring.

Fans also had the opportunity to watch the first three-night promotion in the history of Houston Wrestling. The tournament was held in conjunction with the celebration of Paul Boesch's fifty years in professional wrestling, and it was a big success! Matches were held on Friday and Saturday night, and the finals on Sunday afternoon. The promotion set a new Houston Wrestling record at the box office for a single weekend. Tito Santana was the big winner of the "Gold Cup" tournament with an impressive win over AWA World Champion Nick Bockwinkel. Bockwinkel's title was not on the line during the tournament; however, his reputation was.

In addition to the stars already mentioned, the Houston Wrestling promotion brought in many others such as Manny Fernandez, Colonel Buck Robley, Larry Lane, Tommy "Wildfire" Rich, and most importantly, the return of the Junkyard Dog. This time he came back and stayed, much to the delight of the thousands of Houston Wrestling fans who loved "JYD."

Despite the disruptive political wars outside the wrestling ring in 1981, it was one of the best wrestling action-producing years in recent history. The Houston Wrestling promotion was still afloat, at least for now.

The 1982 season began with the annual Twenty-Two Man Two-Ring Battle Royal; however Andre the Giant was not there. He was being booked out of Vince McMahon Jr.'s New York office, another clear sign that Vince Jr. wanted to eventually take over the professional wrestling market in Houston. By holding back Andre, Vince hoped our promotion would

stumble. Despite Andre the Giant's absence, the opening show was a success.

The Houston Wrestling scene in the first four months of 1982 was dominated by the same stars that made the last season successful: Bruiser Brody, Gorgeous Gino Hernandez, Dusty Rhodes, Terry Funk, Dory Funk Jr., Superstar Billy Graham, Tito Santana, Dick Slater, The Grappler, Manny Fernandez, Tiger Conway Jr., Buck Robley, Tully Blanchard, AWA World Champion Nick Bockwinkel, Tommy "Wildfire" Rich, Mil Mascaras, Bob Sweetan, Hacksaw Duggan, Blackie Gordman, Tom Prichard, Ricky Morton, Chavo Guerrero, Cyclone Negro, Ivan the Terrible, Wahoo McDaniel, and the Junkyard Dog. There were also solid supporting wrestlers like Killer Tim Brooks, Don Serano, Grenade Boyer and Mexican masked star El Canek adding to the list of talent.

Yet there was dissent in the dressing room. The top wrestlers were thinking more about themselves than the overall good of the professional wrestling business, and were positioning themselves to make them very attractive to Vince McMahon Jr., and his lucrative long term contracts. Loyalty between wrestlers and promoters was being severely tested.

A devastating blow came to the Houston Wrestling promotion when we received a letter from the City of Houston stating that the Sam Houston Coliseum would not be available for the promotion for an entire month. Would this be the final blow?

FRIDAY MAY 14, 1982

During the turbulent eighties, several events helped shape the course of the Houston Wrestling promotion. None of them were more important than the Friday, May 14, 1982 wrestling show.

Promoter Paul Boesch's wife of nearly fifty years, Eleonore, was in the final stages of her several-year battle with lung cancer. Anyone who has nursed a spouse or loved one through such tragic times knows that the experience wears down the surviving loved ones as well as the patient. Paul was exhausted, even though he had turned over the majority of the promotion over to me. My uncle was a man full of life and enthusiasm, but watching his beloved wife fading away had taken its toll.

Boesch lost a lot of his drive for the business, which made the challenges of the 1980s even more formidable. We'd had too many disappointments. There were frivolous lawsuits and constant hassles with attorneys. There were unreasonable and unfair changes in our business relationship with the City of Houston. The State of Texas had passed a sales tax to be levied on the price of wrestling tickets in addition to the already established commissioner's tax. This brought the total state taxes paid on each wrestling ticket to over ten percent, which came at a time that other expenses related to the business were quickly escalating during economic hard times. It was becoming harder and harder to survive.

The most disappointing change was not at the cash register, but in the dressing room. Gusts of uncertainty and frustration were setting in. Our talents' attitudes were negatively affected. One of the many elements of the professional wrestling business which, at one time, had been a lot of fun, was the dressing room. There were friendships, excitement, and most importantly, camaraderie. That feeling was an integral component of professional wrestling. The reputation of the Houston Wrestling promotion enhanced the camaraderie between promoters and the talent. The producers of the movie *The Wrestler*, starring Mickey Rourke, did a good job of

depicting this affectionate camaraderie, which had existed in professional wrestling for generations.

As national wrestling promotions started up across the country, that camaraderie was disappearing. National promotions needed top talent and were willing to pay top dollars. Friendships abruptly dissolved because of the power of money. Long-term relationships were replaced with the attitude of *What have you done for me lately?* Or better yet: *What can you do for me NOW?* The new strategy was every man for himself. Loyalty between promoters and wrestlers was becoming strained as individual interests prevailed over doing what was best for the business.

The cheer of the dressing room was gone, replaced by distrust, frustration, and tension thick enough to cut with a knife. That was getting worse with every show. One Friday night after a couple dressing room incidents, Boesch was consumed with despair. I still remember nearly thirty years later the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice when he told me, “Pete, it is just not any fun anymore.” This from a man who had loved the sport and business for fifty years!

It was late March, and the City of Houston notified the office that, due to a multiple booking of the Sam Houston Coliseum, Houston Wrestling could not have a date there for a month between April 18th and May 14th. There were no alternative facilities. The Fonde Recreation Center was not suitable. Business was too slow to consider running a show at the Summit.

I had been thinking all weekend about what Houston Wrestling could do to answer the swelling challenges. Paul had suggested the previous Friday night that closing the office for three weeks was warranted to minimize the losses. The Houston Wrestling promotion was already operating in the red during the first three months of 1982.

I did some soul-searching. I was facing my uncle's frustrations and a dwindling income. I was twenty-eight years old with a wife to support and a baby boy, Jonathan, who was less than a year old. I had a Masters in Business Administration and had recently been offered a very promising career opportunity. I had faced these same questions earlier, but decided that there was no way I could leave my uncle while my aunt Eleonore, who I dearly loved, was dying and the wrestling business was so bad. Everything had built up to this latest obstacle. What should Houston Wrestling do? What should Peter Birkholz do?

For over a half a century, Houston Wrestling prided itself on being a successful weekly promotion. There was a Friday night here and there when the town was “dark” (the expression used in the business when a promotion did not run), but that did not happen very often. Never had we considered the possibility of going dark for a month. It would be a severe test for the promotion. Could Houston Wrestling survive?

A quick drive to the beaches of Galveston was just what I needed. Sometimes there is no better remedy than to get away, clear the mind, and to cleanse oneself of all emotions.

During the therapeutic beach walk, I considered every possible course of action, and ruled out one option after another. There was only one that could possibly work. Maybe, after fifty years of being a weekly promotion, it was time for Houston Wrestling to change to a monthly promotion. To the reader this may seem like an easy and natural decision. However, Houston Wrestling succeeded while hundreds of other wrestling promotions failed, in large part due to its weekly promotional strategy. Also, keep in mind that the Houston Wrestling television show had been running weekly for over thirty-two years, but it would be in jeopardy if the promotion changed to a monthly schedule.

Was it worth the gamble? Did Houston Wrestling have a choice?

It was my belief that we did not. Now the challenge was to convince my uncle, the television station, the wrestlers, and the booking office that the time had come for change. Not just any change, but a very radical and risky one.

Through the last fifty plus years there had been numerous attempts by weekly promotions to change to monthly promotions. Some attempts were successful, but most were not. The most successful example was Madison Square Garden, which, at the time, was a monthly promotion of the World Wrestling Federation (now the WWE). The old WWF not only promoted New York City monthly, but used that same monthly strategy for their other major markets in the northeast. There was also the Omni in Atlanta, Georgia, where the World Championship Wrestling Promotion promoted monthly shows with great success.

I started to present the innovative approach to Boesch the following Monday morning in his office. My uncle did not give the presentation a fair opportunity. Less than two minutes elapsed before, in a fit of anger, he cut

me off. In a raised voice he declared that it was a stupid idea and would put Houston Wrestling out of business!

Before I had the chance to choose my words wisely, I shouted back, “We have no choice!” Complete silence followed. I had never raised my voice to my uncle before. I was a frustrated assistant promoter and a frustrated nephew. The glare from my uncle pierced through me. Nevertheless, I continued the presentation. In my mind, I had nothing to lose. I talked quickly, fearing any hesitation would give my uncle a chance to literally kick me out of his office.

I spoke of how this month of being “dark” could be turned into a positive opportunity. It would force Houston Wrestling to change from a weekly promotion to a monthly event. I showed him how I proposed to rescale seating in the Coliseum to allow more high priced seats. Then I proposed an increase in ticket prices which would be needed to provide enough revenue for the promotion to survive if it would only have one live show per month. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. My uncle had enough. He stated that an increase in ticket prices would be the final blow to the Houston Wrestling promotion.

He took the black calendar book that lay in front of him and placed it in front of me. The book contained all the pertinent information needed for the promotion, including the dates the Coliseum was booked and the names of the stars already signed on the dates they were to work. Most importantly, the black calendar book was the symbol of authority! Boesch said, “Fine, big shot, this is your show. When you lose your shirt it will come out of your wallet, not mine.” He picked up his briefcase and walked out the door.

Boesch may be a legend in professional wrestling, but even legends are human. His personal and professional lives were drastically changing. His wife was not expected to live much longer. He was also dealing with the depressing reality that the business that he loved for over fifty years was changing into one he no longer enjoyed. He needed time to regroup. He needed an out. This opportunity gave him a way to leave. I still do not know for certain whether he handed me the book out of despair, or if he felt it was time for me to have an opportunity to step out of his huge shadow. Both of us knew that there would be a day when I would take over the promotion. Maybe this would be the day.

I sat there staring at the black calendar book. Should I do the same thing as Paul Boesch, pick up my briefcase and go home? A few weeks earlier, I'd been given an opportunity to quit the professional wrestling business and teach full time at a university. I was already teaching part time at the University of Houston at Clear Lake. The head of the Management and Marketing department, Dr. William Staples, had talked to me about the possibility of becoming a college professor. This was the career I had wanted to pursue before the long detour into professional wrestling. He said he would help me get accepted into the doctoral program at the University of Houston and would give me a teaching schedule that would work around my doctoral classes. Was the Lord closing the door on my professional wrestling career and opening a door giving me the opportunity to fulfill my dream? The temptation was there!

However, there was the black book, the symbol of power of the Houston Wrestling promotion, lying in front of me. My uncle had thrown down the challenge. The competitive spirit inside me swelled as I put the situation into perspective. I had successfully promoted in numerous smaller towns and had taken over many of the responsibilities at Houston Wrestling during my twenty-plus years in the business. Still, it would be the first time in nearly forty years that the Houston Wrestling promotion would not have any input or help from Paul Boesch. It was scary, but I picked up the book and walked into my office!

I was determined that if this show was indeed going to be my last in professional wrestling, I was going to go down swinging. My head still spinning from the emotional meeting, I started to work on a promotional strategy for the Friday, May 14th, promotion.

My strategy began with the idea that we would make the card “The Greatest Card in Houston Wrestling History.” Those were big words and needed to be backed up with big action. There had been numerous “Greatest Cards in Houston Wrestling History” during the last fifty years. Fans would have to be convinced that this time it was true. Even more importantly, Paul Boesch would have to be convinced, and so would the television station and the wrestlers!

The first step was to plan the main event. I put together a World Title showdown between American Wrestling Alliance World Champion Nick Bockwinkel and Houston Wrestling’s hottest wrestler at the time, the Junkyard Dog. Nick and I had developed a close friendship. I respected his

ability in the ring and his vast knowledge of the business. Nick enjoyed coming to Houston to work and had always taken a special interest in the promotion. I would find out why in a couple of months. I felt confident that he would be available and accept the booking since the date was nearly two months away. After I signed Bockwinkel, he became a valuable confidant to me in planning the card since Boesch would have nothing to do with the show. I used him as a sounding board.

I was also confident that Junkyard Dog would sign, because he knew that a shot at the World Title meant a possible big gate and a big payoff for him. He also knew that I was instrumental in bringing him to Houston Wrestling, and that I was responsible for the big push he received on the Houston Wrestling television show. I was a big fan of Junkyard Dog not only because I liked him personally, but because I felt he had the opportunity to be a real superstar for the promotion. After the Junkyard Dog agreed to work that night, he promised to do everything he could to make the promotion a huge success.

After the first showdown was secure, I started working on another super showdown between our number one “heel,” Gorgeous Gino Hernandez. and World Championship Wrestling‘s superstar Tommy “Wildfire” Rich. I felt I could count on Hernandez because we were close friends and had helped each other in various stages of our careers. Gino jumped at the opportunity, realizing how crucial this show would be for me and, more importantly, for the Houston Wrestling promotion. He was quickly establishing himself as the second most famous “Gorgeous One” in Houston Wrestling history, though the title still belonged to Gorgeous George Wagner. But Gorgeous Gino was a premier showman, and wrestling fans were begging for someone to shut his gorgeous face up.

Tommy “Wildfire” Rich was indeed sweeping the plains of professional wrestling like a “wildfire,” fueled by the popular national broadcast of *World Championship Wrestling* on Ted Turner’s Superstation. Turner’s Superstation had established a substantial viewing audience in the Houston television market. Tommy's appearance would give Houston Wrestling fans the perception that superstars from around the world were coming to do battle! It would also be very beneficial to have two of professional wrestling’s most handsome men on the card. The girls thought they were cute, had great bodies, and really enjoyed the small tights they wore.

The third showdown would feature Mil Mascaras, “The Man of a Thousand Masks,” against Manny Fernandez, a tough Mexican grappler. Mascaras was a proven box office sensation, idolized by Hispanic wrestling fans and a famous international movie and television star. I was elated when Mascaras agreed to help. Manny Fernandez was a wrestler who had just turned “heel” and denounced his heritage, claiming he was not a Mexican. Fernandez was feared by everybody--except Mascaras, who could defeat the evil Fernandez and restore honor to Mexico!

Because three was not enough, my fourth showdown featured Chief Wahoo McDaniel against his archrival, Tully Blanchard. Tully Blanchard was a hated villain in Texas, very arrogant, and fans despised him. He was viewed as the spoiled son of Joe Blanchard, a former Texas Heavyweight Champion and well-known wrestling promoter. The feud between Wahoo and Tully had raged for several months. Fans wanted a showdown, and this one would be special, an “Indian Strap” match. Wahoo had never lost one. It was a vicious form of combat in which contestants were joined at the wrist by a ten foot rawhide strap. There was no escape, no way out, so the feud would be settled once and for all! Fans knew both men used the rawhide strap against their opponent, leaving huge and sometimes bleeding welts on each others’ bodies. It was dangerous, and a perfect opportunity for Wahoo McDaniel to give bratty Blanchard the strapping of his life!

The rest of the card was filled with other stars like Superstar Billy Graham, Jim Golden, Hacksaw Jim Duggan, Ricky Morton, Bruiser Bob Sweetan, Ken Lucas, Scott Casey and Killer Brooks. They would not only wrestle in single matches, but all eight would battle in a dangerous eight-man “Gang War.” Now the card really was shaping up to be the “Greatest Card in Houston Wrestling History!”

Once a wrestling promoter has his card in place, it is his responsibility to determine how to promote it. It is not just the stars or the matches that make the card; that's just the steak. The promoter has to add the sizzle. He can't do it alone. He needs the support of the talent, he needs everybody’s cooperation in making the television show as effective as possible. Finally, he must make sure everybody knows their responsibility and does their job. *Then* everything sizzles!

As you know, the main event would feature professional wrestling’s number one black star, Junkyard Dog, against World Heavyweight Champion Nick Bockwinkel. The fact that “JYD” could become the first

black World Champion was not enough for “The Greatest Wrestling card in Houston Wrestling History.” The main event needed even more sizzle: a personal issue, and a very explosive one.

Nick Bockwinkel and Junkyard Dog established that issue when, during a television interview, Bockwinkel cowardly belted an unsuspecting Junkyard Dog across his head with the World Title belt. This unprovoked attack knocked JYD to the ground while Bockwinkel quickly exited. The Junkyard Dog stood back up, his head bleeding, and vowed revenge. “No one does that to JYD!” he screamed, promising Houston Wrestling fans that he would not only win the World Title on May 14th, , but that he would make Bockwinkel pay for what he did. Fans had never seen Junkyard Dog that angry, and they knew the World Champion was in serious trouble. How is that for sizzle?

Now my focus turned towards the Gorgeous Gino and Tommy “Wildfire” Rich showdown. A match between two of professional wrestling’s biggest hunks would be sensational, and extra sizzle came in the form of colorful promotional tapes from Tommy Rich and television announcers from the Superstation talking about the “Greatest Card in Houston Wrestling History.” Fans were now hearing from reliable sources that Friday, May 14th, would indeed be a historic night.

Gorgeous Gino gave some of the best interviews of his career. He put everything he could into his promotional tapes, and had Houston wrestling fans convinced that not only was Friday, May 14th, going to be an historic night for Houston Wrestling, but an historic night for Gorgeous Gino. He was going to whip Tommy “Wildfire” Rich and proclaim himself the most famous young star in the business. Both superstars demanded a Texas Death Match inside the steel cage! What more could wrestling fans want?The sizzle was turning into a roar!

The next match was the Mexican showdown between Mil Mascaras and Manny Fernandez, who had violently turned on all other Mexican wrestlers. His promotional tapes created even more “heat,” as he did a great job convincing Mexican wrestling fans that he was the biggest villain to hit Mexico since Pancho Villa.

As for Mil Mascaras, he was not able to send any video tapes since he was on a big world tour. However, I contacted him by phone and asked him to please make a verbal appeal to the Mexican fans. He agreed, and called the television station so *Houston Wrestling’s* director could tape the call and

air it later that week. What a call it was! Mil Mascaras made an emotional appeal to his many fans as he told them it would be the biggest match of his career and he needed their support. His voice cracking with emotion, he pleaded with them to bring their Mexican flags and chant “Mexico, Mexico, Mexico!” He said he could not win without them, but, together, they could defeat the evil Manny Fernandez and restore honor to their dearly beloved Mexico. That interview not only added sizzle, but red hot popping sizzle.

Now my attention shifted to Wahoo McDaniel and Tully Blanchard's “Indian Strap Match.” Their feud was known from the banks of the Red River to the mighty Rio Grande, so every wrestling fan in the Lone Star State was demanding the showdown. Wahoo did some tremendous television interviews with the Indian strap. He slapped that rawhide strap against the floor, the wall, and the television backdrop. Every time you heard the terrifying smack, Wahoo screamed about how dangerous the match was. He warned that every time the strap hit human skin, it acted like a razor and cut flesh open. Wahoo reminded fans that he had never lost an “Indian Strap Match” and he made an emotional promise to fans that he would give Tully Blanchard the whipping of his life.

As for Tully Blanchard, he did a superb job of being his arrogant self on television interviews. Fans loved to hate him. He also showed fear, saying he was frightened for his life, and protesting that the “Indian Strap Match” was too dangerous. He screamed that it should be outlawed, which was just what Houston Wrestling fans wanted to hear.

A wrestling promoter could not have asked for anything more. The wrestlers were doing whatever they could, the sizzle was roaring, and we had four weeks of television to promote the historic event. Would it indeed be the “Greatest Card in Houston Wrestling History,” or would the evening flop and deliver a devastating blow to the Houston Wrestling promotion?

As I watched the first television show from a lounge chair in my living room, I could not help but feel a tsunami of anxiety. Most promoters and entertainers can’t help but feel the same as they wait for the results of their hard work and preparation.

The television show was superb. The wrestling action was great. The interviews were some of the best ever produced. *Houston Wrestling* Director Ed Worthington did an excellent job of assembling the show just as we had discussed. I felt the confidence one feels when they know that they have done everything they could, but there was the frightening element of

the unknown. Ticket sales on Monday morning would be the first clue as to whether the Friday, May 14th promotion would be a success or a mistake.

After a night of tossing and turning, I decided to go the ticket office a little early. There was a lot of work to do, and the anxiety was overwhelming. I drove down the Gulf Freeway toward the office. Paul Boesch was out of town and would stay out of town until the morning of Friday, May 14th. After nearly forty years, could Houston Wrestling survive without Paul Boesch? My mind was racing as I battled the rush-hour traffic. Had we done everything we could? Had we convinced Houston Wrestling fans that Friday was going to be an historic night? Dozens of other questions and concerns swirled in my head. I was just blocks away from the ticket office, which was not scheduled to open for another hour.

I made the final turn onto Caroline Street and saw it: a line of several dozen wrestling fans waiting for the office to open! I parked the car and walked toward the door, assuring fans I would open the office early so they could buy tickets. One person cheerfully yelled, “I can't to wait see the 'Greatest Wrestling Card in Houston Wrestling History!” Those words were music to my ears, especially since it was the most important promotion of my career. Ask any promoter, marketer, advertiser, or campaign manager and they'll be the first to tell you that when the receivers of your message repeat your message just like you sent it, you did your job!

Ticket sales started at a record pace, and continued like that for four weeks. The box office gate that night set a new Texas Wrestling record. The rescaling of the arena and raised ticket prices did not stop over twelve thousand Houston Wrestling fans from coming out to watch the show. Thousands of others were turned away.

The event itself was outstanding. World Heavyweight Champion Nick Bockwinkel barely held onto his title on a technicality. The Junkyard Dog had the champion on his back and it looked like he'd become the new World Champion, but Bockwinkel’s manager Bobby Heenan interfered. The illegal interference caused a disqualification and JYD won the match, but, as any good wrestling fan could tell you, the rules prohibit a World Champion from losing his title on a disqualification. Nevertheless, the victory gave JYD a justification to start calling himself the “King of Wrestling,” which infuriated World Champion Nick Bockwinkel and his manager Bobby Heenan. This was a perfect setting for a series of rematches and title showdowns throughout the months to come.

Gorgeous Gino and Tommy “Wildfire” Rich put on a show with their Texas Death Match inside the steel cage. Gino was the controversial winner, an important step for him on his way to the top of the business. As for Tommy “Wildfire” Rich, he continued to headline across the nation, never missing a beat.

The fierce battle between Mil Mascaras and Manny Fernandez had the Mexican fans on their feet and screaming during the entire confrontation. There were Mexican flags waving and chants of “Mexico-Mexico-Mexico” from every section of the sold-out crowd. Mascaras was the ultimate winner; however, the battle got out of hand as both men had to be physically separated. Even though Mascaras’s hand was raised, much to the delight of thousands of Mexican wrestling fans, they wanted more. That would come later when the two superstars met in a “Mexican Death Match” two weeks later in the same Coliseum.

Chief Wahoo McDaniel was victorious over Tully Blanchard in the “Indian Strap Match”. The sold-out crowd erupted into a thunderous celebration as Wahoo kept his perfect winning record. Devious Tully Blanchard attacked Wahoo from behind, however, and injured the Indian star. The feud would continue.

Did our fantastic team effort create the “Greatest Wrestling Card in Houston Wrestling History?” Fans and historians may debate that for some time. But was it a promotion that changed Houston Wrestling history? Absolutely!

Houston Wrestling was alive and well, but the time for change had arrived. Houston Wrestling could be successful, even without Paul Boesch. Never again would there be just one captain at the wheel of the Houston Wrestling promotion!

AFTER MAY 14, 1982

American Wrestling Alliance World Heavyweight Champion Nick Bockwinkel was a guest at Paul Boesch's home on the night of May 14, 1982. Boesch and Bockwinkel had a friendship that dated back to the 1940s, when Paul met young Nicki, the son of Paul's good friend Warren Bockwinkel. Boesch watched Nick grow up and develop into one of the premier professional wrestling stars in the business. The relationship grew through the years as both men respected each other and enjoyed each others' company.

For many years, Nick Bockwinkel and Boesch had had unofficial conversations about what would happen after Boesch retired from the professional wrestling business. Bockwinkel had asked Paul to let him know when that time came, because Nick was interested in buying the Houston Wrestling promotion. Nick knew that he could not wrestle forever, and if he wanted to stay involved with the business that he loved, he would need to be associated with a professional wrestling promotion. Boesch was interested in selling the promotion to Nick, whom he felt would make a great promoter and would add a vital, personal touch. That was important to Paul Boesch. Both men agreed to continue the conversation when the time came.

The emotional high from the huge success of Friday, May 14th created that moment. Bockwinkel was very impressed with the gate and by Houston Wrestling's prospects, so he approached Boesch at the breakfast table the next morning. Boesch, due to health reasons as well as other personal reasons, felt the time had arrived for him to start to pull out of the Houston Wrestling promotion. After finishing breakfast, they went upstairs to Paul Boesch's office and finalized the deal.

Nick Bockwinkel wrote out a check for the down payment and immediately acquired ten percent of the Houston Wrestling promotion. He agreed to buy the remainder on an installment plan. Both men were very

happy with the deal. That Saturday afternoon I received a phone call from an elated Nick Bockwinkel informing me that he was buying the Houston Wrestling promotion and wanted me to stay on as a partner.

I informed Nick that I had started to make arrangements to go back to teaching at the university and work on my PhD. Nick asked me to please wait and give him a year to finish out his wrestling commitments. He also needed the time to buy a house in Houston and move from Minneapolis. I, too, had a great deal of respect for Nick Bockwinkel and was very appreciative of the help he'd given me in promoting the show the night before. I told Nick that I would stay on one year and help him with the transition from AWA World Champion to his new career as the Houston Wrestling promoter. I was given ten percent of the Houston Wrestling promotion, and it was agreed by all three parties that the transaction would remain private until Nick Bockwinkel wanted to make an official announcement.

Shortly after the deal was completed, Boesch received a phone call from Mid-South Wrestling President Cowboy Bill Watts during our usual Monday morning strategy meeting. Paul signaled for me to stay in the office while they spoke. Watts, never known for beating around the bush, came right out and asked Paul if he was ready to sell the Houston Wrestling promotion. Boesch informed Watts that he had just sold the promotion to Nick Bockwinkel and thanked him for his interest.

My uncle looked at me after he hung up the phone and asked what my thoughts were. I told Paul that Bill Watts was an outstanding promoter and had done a great job raising the Mid-South Wrestling promotion to an all-time high. I had been watching Bill Watts for a couple of years and traveled to some of his big shows, including one at the Superdome to which he drew nearly forty thousand fans. That had been the same night that Junkyard Dog approached me about working Houston. I suggested to Boesch that we might want to meet with Bill Watts and listen closely to what he had to say.

My uncle called Bill Watts back. A meeting was arranged, and Watts came to the Houston Wrestling office with a very interesting and lucrative proposal. It was not just the financial offer that interested Boesch and me, but the fact that being partners with Cowboy Bill Watts would mean a stable supply of top wrestling talent from his booking office. A deal was cut for Bill Watts to initially buy one-third of the Houston Wrestling promotion

from Boesch, with an option to purchase the remaining third later and buy Paul Boesch out completely.

Although Nick Bockwinkel was disappointed, he knew he could not move fast enough to buy the entire Houston Wrestling promotion immediately. He was also a smart businessman who realized the association with Bill Watts would make the Houston Wrestling promotion big enough and strong enough to withstand any assault on the Houston market by Vince McMahon Jr. and his WWF.

We also knew that if Bill Watts was not allowed to be a partner, that he and his Mid-South Wrestling organization were in a great position to move into the Houston wrestling market on their own. After the numbers had settled, Paul Boesch owned one third of the Houston Wrestling promotion, Bill Watts had one third ownership, Nick Bockwinkel had eleven percent ownership, and I had twenty-two percent ownership. The Houston Wrestling promotion was no longer a business entity owned by Paul Boesch. It was now a full-fledged corporation owned by four different entities.

Now that the ownership interests were determined, the next order of business was to decide how the operating structure would be established. Cowboy Bill Watts called and wanted to meet with me to discuss how the new corporate promotion would be structured. I agreed to see him in his motel room to start preliminary discussions.

On the drive to the motel, I reminded myself to keep an open mind and be prepared to make some sacrifices in regards to the duties and responsibilities that Paul and I had in the past. I knew that in the area of creativity, Paul and I would have to relinquish much control. It was with great anticipation that I went to the face-to-face meeting. In typical Bill Watts fashion, he did most of the talking, and I did most of the listening. However, I liked what I was hearing. Bill Watts wanted to keep it very simple and effective. He insisted that he have control over the wrestling talent, the dressing room, and have a major voice in the production of the Houston Wrestling television show.

I would be in charge of all the administrative responsibilities, including the ticket office at 1919 Caroline, the arena box office, the staffing of the promotion, and all promotional activities outside of the wrestling ring. It was not easy giving up control of the creative aspect since I found that to be the most challenging and rewarding aspect of promoting

professional wrestling. However, I knew that Bill Watts was one of the best in the business, and that this would free me to spend more time focusing on what I knew well--the promotion of the wrestling show itself. The meeting was quick and decisive, the structure fell into place, and the Houston Wrestling promotion became bigger and better than ever before.

Bill Watts did an excellent job with his responsibilities, which encouraged me to put everything I had into mine. Boesch remained the figurehead of the Houston Wrestling promotion, a role he welcomed since he was still intending to slowly ease out of the professional wrestling business. Paul was starting to face more health challenges, but he enjoyed the limelight and his new role gave him limelight without the stress and headaches.

It did not take long to realize that working with Bill Watts would be very different than working with my uncle. In the first week of Watts handling the wrestling talent, I received a phone call from the Cowboy who informed me that Ted DiBiase, a wrestler in our main event that night, had broken his hand in a match in Corpus Christi. I said that it was a shame that our first night of promoting together would involve a damaging substitution, especially for the main event. Cowboy Bill Watts screamed, “What the hell are you talking about? I said he broke his hand, not his neck.” Ted DiBiase was in the ring that night.

Yes, the Houston Wrestling promotion was in for a change, one that allowed Paul Boesch, Bill Watts, Nick Bockwinkel, and myself to make a lot of money in the years to come. Promoting professional wrestling with Bill Watts was serious business and that is exactly what the new promotional team did for the next four years---serious business.

After both Bockwinkel and Watts bought into the Houston Wrestling promotion, securing top wrestling talent was no longer a problem. Bockwinkel provided a strong connection with Verne Gagne and the American Wrestling Alliance, while Watts provided plenty of top talent from his booking office, and also developed his own wrestling talent. Watts was a genius in that regard, and was responsible for many of the top stars in the business. Paul Boesch and I kept securing additional talent from our own connections and relationships with other promoters.

In addition to the stars already mentioned, Houston fams watched The Mongolian Stomper, Jerry “The King” Lawler, Terry Gordy, Killer Khan, Ken Lucas, Dick Murdoch, Ted Dibiase, Dos Caras (brother of Mil

Mascaras), Mr. Wrestling II, El Gran Apollo, Ray Candy, Gene Lewis, Coco Samoa, and Kamala, the Ugandan Giant.

One of the most entertaining stories at Houston Wrestling that year was the phenomenon of “Stagger Lee.” It all started with the Junkyard Dog losing a hotly-disputed loser-leave-town match with Hacksaw Jim Duggan. Television cameras caught Jim Duggan cheating with Ted Dibiase to defeat JYD, but JYD still lost the match and had to pack his bags. Or did he?

Next week on the television show, a masked man calling himself “Stagger Lee” showed up and claimed to be a good friend of the Junkyard Dog. He looked just like the Junkyard Dog. He talked just like the Junkyard Dog. He even howled just like the Junkyard Dog. He also wore a t-shirt that said, “I am not the Junkyard Dog.” Of course he was the Junkyard Dog! Some of the television interviews that Junkyard Dog, excuse me, Stagger Lee, produced were classics. In one such interview, Stagger Lee claimed he would prove once and for all that he was not the Junkyard Dog. He excused himself, and all of sudden the Junkyard Dog comes in front of the camera with his hair messed up from the fact that Stagger Lee had quickly removed the mask. The Junkyard Dog hadn't even taken the time to comb his hair. JYD told the announcer he would bring back Stagger Lee, and, when Stagger Lee returned, his mask was on crooked. The interview was hilarious, and wrestling fans loved the gimmick.

Naturally Ted Dibiase and Hacksaw Duggan were furious and protested to the “wrestling officials.” When the protests failed, they vowed that they would unmask Stagger Lee and prove once and for all that it was indeed the Junkyard Dog. As you can imagine, this only added fuel to the fire as Dibiase and Duggan battled “Stagger Lee” in all the Mid-South markets and everybody made big bucks. You couldn't do this in football or baseball--only professional wrestling!

Due to the changes made in the Houston Wrestling promotion, 1982 was a super year for wrestling talent. And this was just the beginning!

The new corporate Houston Wrestling promotion made important changes to the Houston Wrestling television show and to the scheduling of live shows. The success of our Friday, May 14th, show proved that the promotion did not have to run on a weekly basis to be successful. With careful planning, a bi-weekly promotion could be more profitable than a weekly promotion. We also had access to more wrestling action on tape, which was plenty for the two television shows on Channel 39 each week.

The promotion taped matches from the live cards at the Sam Houston Coliseum and combined that with wrestling action from the Mid-South television show to produce two action-packed television shows each week. This formula was a big hit with wrestling fans. Ratings began to rise alongside box office receipts.

While there were many changes, there were many Houston Wrestling traditions that remained. One of those was the Twenty-Two-Man Two-Ring Battle Royal starting off the new year. The event had become such a success that there were years where the Houston Wrestling promotion would promote the Battle Royal on July 4th weekend. As long as the cash registers kept ringing, the Houston Wrestling promotion would promote the action-packed event. The Ugandan Giant, Kamala, won, but only after he received illegal help from Jim Duggan to beat the favorite, Tony Atlas. Kamala rampaged through all opposition, either legally or illegally. Fans screamed for someone to stop him. As always, Houston Wrestling promoters met these demands, and brought in Andre the Giant to face Kamala in a "Battle of the Giants" on Friday, January 28th. Andre came to Houston and once again, good won over evil.

Due to the fact that Tony Atlas was cheated out of the $25,000 prize money in the Battle Royal, "Mr. USA" was given an opportunity to settle the score. Atlas got his revenge the next few weeks as he defeated Jim Duggan and later Kamala. Justice was served in the professional wrestling world. If only that could be the case in real life.

In the early months of 1983, the dressing room was full of talent. AWA World Champion Nick Bockwinkel was making more trips to Houston to defend his title, which Houston fans were starting to respect more than any other title in the business. Bockwinkel was taking a more active role in the promotion since he was now an eleven-percent owner, which made him a great asset inside and outside the ring.

On Friday, May 20, fans watched two World Title matches on the same night. For Houston Wrestling fans, it was the first time that both the American Wrestling Alliance World Title and the WWF World Title were at stake. AWA World Champion Nick Bockwinkel took on a serious challenge from Dusty Rhodes, while WWF World Champion Bob Backlund, battled Afa the Samoan.

The revitalized Houston Wrestling was becoming a magnet for even more stars and box office attractions. Fans watched King Kong Bundy,

Butch Reed, Steve “Dr. Death” Williams, Larry Zybsco, “Mad Dog” Buzz Sawyer, Big John Studd, Russian star Nicoli Volkoff, The Iron Sheik, General Akbar, Krusher Darson, Mr. Olympia, Matt Borne, The Super Destroyer, Magnum Terry Allan, the Missing Link, Jim “The Anvil” Niedhart, and the Midnight Express tag team managed by Jim Cornett.

The 1983 season saw the return of Jose Lothario. Lothario made several appearances that year, delighting fans who had cheered him on for over twenty years. Lothario always gave one hundred and ten percent. He was also one of the finest individuals that ever stepped into any wrestling ring in any town, and gave wrestling fans their money’s worth.

Another special event was the debut of Steve “Dr. Death” Williams, the outstanding collegiate wrestler and four time All-American football star at the University of Oklahoma. Cowboy Bill Watts had been a great wrestler and football player at the University of Oklahoma, and took Steve Williams under his wing. His influence helped Dr. Death rise to the top of the professional wrestling world. Recently, I had conversation with Billy Sims, the sensational running back who won the Heisman trophy in 1978 while playing for the University of Oklahoma. He was one of Steve Williams’ teammates. With a smile, he expressed his gratitude for Dr. Death, who blocked for him and was one of the main reasons why he won the Heisman Trophy. Williams was one of many superb athletes to come out of the University of Oklahoma, including Leroy McGuirk, Danny Hodge, Bill Watts and Wahoo McDaniel. Unfortunately, Steve Williams passed away from throat cancer on December 29, 2009, but not before battling the deadly disease with everything he had.

Those of you who are hardcore wrestling fans will quickly discover that many of the stars featured at Houston Wrestling that year went on to dominate McMahon’s WWF later in the decade. The talent enabled the new corporate Houston Wrestling promotion to shatter all annual attendance records in 1983!

The Houston Wrestling television show was rising in the ratings as excitement rose in the ring, creating a powerful synergy. As television ratings increased, wrestlers got more excited and worked harder, producing more excitement for the television show, pushing ratings still higher and toward new records.

By the beginning of 1984, the new corporate promotion was running on all cylinders. Paul Boesch was enjoying his stress-free figurehead role.

He became an ambassador of professional wrestling during his world travels and trips to entertain television sponsors. He did some interviews to keep his well-known image on the television show, and when he was planning his long trips, we taped interviews to air while he was away. Houston Wrestling fans never knew he was playing a limited role, and that was fine with him.

I was more comfortable with my responsibility taking care of the Houston Wrestling ticket office and various promotional duties outside of the wrestling ring. Gone were the days of getting the list of available wrestlers from the booking office every Monday morning, then meeting with Paul in his office. In those good old days, I would be sure to have the calendar book filled with the names of top stars, who we booked with our own efforts. Paul and I then drank coffee and discussed our creative strategy for the next few weeks. This discussion focused on who we would have work together. We also planned our television shows. At the same time, I took notes on what to write about in the Houston Wrestling program, and I began writing the various press releases to be sent to the local media.

During those sessions, my uncle would tell me professional wrestling stories from both in and out of the wrestling ring. I thoroughly enjoyed my uncle's stories, many of which you have already read. We would laugh together as we brainstormed all kinds of creative ways to put together a moneymaking professional wrestling show or an exciting television show. To this day, I still miss those strategic sessions.

Though the creative element was no longer a major responsibility for my uncle and me, it was in the very capable hands of Cowboy Bill Watts. Bill Watts had one of the most innovative minds in the professional wrestling business. Whether putting together a television show or the live action inside the wrestling ring, Watts was at the top of his game. A Tuesday morning postal package from Mid-South Wrestling's headquarters replaced the promotional strategy meetings with my uncle. The package contained a copy of the upcoming live professional wrestling card and also copies of the upcoming television log sheets. I took that information and went to work promoting and advertising those shows. Everybody worked together as a team and business was very good. Success and money always helps people accept change.

Back to the action inside the ring! The Russian team of Nicoli Volkoff and Krusher Darsow was red hot. In the early eighties, the Cold War was

still raging, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan was an explosive subject. President Reagan was escalating the arms build-up and the rhetoric was still quite tense. The Houston Wrestling fans hated the so-called Russian Nicoli Volkoff, but even more they hated Krusher Darsow because he was a "double-crossing traitor," an American who "defected" to the Russians. Volkoff and Darsow carried the Russian flag to the ring, and Volkoff insisted on singing the Russian national anthem before his matches. This was a great opening for the entry of the "good guys." American wrestlers who marched down to the ring waving the American Flag to the deafening chants from thousands of Houston Wrestling fans screaming, "USA! USA! USA!"

At that time, there were plenty of "good guys" to battle the controversial Russians: the Junkyard Dog, a repentant Hacksaw Jim Duggan, All-American Steve "Dr. Death" Williams, Magnum T.A., Jose Lothario, Tito Santana, Mr. Wrestling II and "American Dream" Dusty Rhodes. Through the years, Rhodes made appearances at Houston Wrestling regardless of where else in the country he was working. There were a couple reasons why he did that. First, he was a big hit with Houston Wrestling fans, so it was a smart financial move. More importantly, his mother lived in Houston and Dusty Rhodes liked staying close to his family.

Cowboy Bill Watts milked the Russia versus United States gimmick for all it was worth, but that was not the only tag team angle we promoted. "The Midnight Express," managed by the controversial Jim Cornett, was also sizzling. Cornett was the rich Mama's boy who carried a tennis racket, a symbol of being spoiled and wealthy. He used the racket to smash the heads of the good guys when the referee was not looking. Cornett was also a great talker, and was involved in some of the most entertaining television interviews. I always enjoyed interviewing Cornett because he challenged you with his wit, so you had to be ready for him. What made the Midnight Express so good was not only Cornett's talking skills, but the action-producing skills of Bobby Eaton and Dennis Condrey. Cornett talked the talk while Eaton and Condrey walked the walk. Wrestling fans loved to hate The Midnight Express.

There were plenty of "baby face" tag teams ready to take them on, including The Rock N' Roll Express, The Bruise Brothers, various combinations of "Baby-Faced" wrestlers, and later on in the year, The Fantastics. The tremendous success of smaller wrestlers like The Midnight

Express and The Rock N' Roll Express was the result of a new marketing strategy. The concept of market segmentation was reshaping the business. Gone were the days when the "smaller" wrestlers could not make big money because they would be put against the "bigger" wrestlers. When they could not compete, these smaller men would lose their appeal to the fans. Professional wrestling promoters were now smart enough to put smaller "heels" against smaller "baby faces." Even Paul Boesch was finally convinced that market segmentation was good for professional wrestling. This was a hard concept for "old school" promoters to embrace at first.

The new appreciation of market segmentation came about because of a new method that television stations were using to determine their ratings. This changed not only the television industry, but the wrestling industry as well. Out the window went the old methods of personal interviews, phone surveys, and personal diaries. The new and much more accurate method was the so-called "black box." This box was attached to various test-market television sets, and kept track of what television shows were being watched and for how long. In the past, professional wrestling television shows would not do well by the old methods, because many fans would not admit in person or on surveys that they watched professional wrestling. It was interesting to me how, through the years, thousands of fans told me how their grandmother or grandfather watched professional wrestling on television. I quickly detected, however, that they were the so-called "closet" wrestling fan. Black boxes told the truth and nothing but the truth.

These new ratings provided shocking facts about professional wrestling television viewership. First, it proved to television station managers something that professional wrestling promoters already knew--there were a lot more families watching professional wrestling on television then the old ratings were showing. In the Houston television market, the first weekend that the black boxes were installed, *Houston Wrestling's* ratings skyrocketed, nearly doubling in some areas. This was the case all across America, and one of the main reasons that there was a huge surge of support for professional wrestling television shows. This movement not only gave regional promotions a push, but provided an opportunity for Vince McMahon Jr. to make his move and take the WWF nationwide.

Not only did the new television research techniques prove how many households were watching professional wrestling, but they unveiled more surprising feedback on exactly who was watching. The old stereotype of a

wrestling television fan was an overweight man in his undershirt holding a can of beer. The black boxes suggested there were more female viewers than males, which jolted television management and professional wrestling promoters. Not only did the gender breakdown open some eyes, but the numbers showed that the wrestling television audience had a huge block of young viewers, including teenage girls. National marketers love to market to teenage girls because teenage girls love to spend money, especially if it is not their own. Now you can understand why the eighties saw a wave of cute young wrestlers wearing short, tight, wrestling outfits to please the girls.

The phenomenon of The Rock N' Roll Express was a classic example. Ricky Morton and Robert Gibson were not as big as the massive grapplers fans were accustomed to seeing in the main events, but they were very skilled wrestlers. Women thought they were cute and had sexy bodies. They held their own as individual wrestlers, but, when they joined together and marketed themselves as The Rock N. Roll Express, they became superstars. They dressed like rock and roll stars, and acted like rock and roll stars. After viewing one of their promotional tapes, it occurred to me that we needed to enhance the way they entered the wrestling ring. After a quick phone call, I reserved a spotlight for the upcoming Friday night matches.

Morton and Gibson also provided cassettes of rock and roll music, which were played as they made their way to the ring. That Friday night, the Sam Houston Coliseum sound system blasted rock and roll music. As the lights were turned off, the spotlight shone on The Rock N Roll Express. The crowd went wild! Young female wrestling fans started to scream and rushed to the aisle, trying desperately to touch Morton and Gibson. It was fascinating how quickly the young wrestlers were transformed into rock stars. This was just one of the changes the Houston Wrestling promotion made due to market segmentation, but similar changes were underway in wrestling promotions across the country.

The Junkyard Dog was still the "top dog" in the early months of 1984. However, Houston Wrestling fans were saddened when he lost his American Championship belt to Mr. Wrestling II, and word spread that he would be leaving Mid-South Wrestling. The Junkyard Dog was a big asset to our promotion. Bill Watts did a great job of working with Sylvester Ritter in creating the famous character, and Ritter took that character and joined the WWF. He thought it was the best move for him and his professional wrestling career. Vince McMahon immediately made The Junkyard Dog

one of his biggest stars and even used him in the famous Saturday morning cartoons featuring the World Wrestling Federation's superstars.

I will always be grateful to the Junkyard Dog and the contribution he made to the Houston Wrestling promotion, both in and out of the ring. There were many times that Junkyard Dog used his fan appeal to raise money for worthwhile causes or bring smiles to the faces of disadvantaged children. It was a sad day when I heard that Sylvester Ritter had died. He was one of the finest professional wrestlers I had the pleasure of working with.

Fans were also saddened that year to read about the passing of two more favorite wrestlers. El Santo and David Von Erich, oldest son of world famous Fritz Von Erich, died in the same month. El Santo was a legend in the professional wrestling world and the motion picture industry, starring in over sixty Mexican movies. He was an icon on the Mexican television screen, and a big favorite of Houston Wrestling fans.

The death of David Von Erich in Japan was only the beginning of a heartbreaking list of tragedies that devastated the world-famous Von Erich family. Jack Adkisson, better known as Fritz Von Erich, married a beautiful woman named Doris. Together they had six sons. The rest of the Von Erich story reads like a Shakespearean tragedy, as five of the six sons died at a young age. Some of them took their own lives. Without a doubt the Von Erich family was one of the most talented and athletic families in the history of American sports. One cannot help but feel sad because of the deeds left undone and the dreams left unfulfilled. Fritz and Doris later divorced, and some say she blamed him for the chaos and heartache. Jack Adkisson, Fritz Von Erich, died on September 10, 1997, of complications from lung cancer.

Jim "The Anvil" Niedhart was one of the stars battling in Houston Wrestling main events that year. Jim was a very gifted athlete in many sports, but decided that he wanted to be a professional wrestler and moved to the Pacific Northwest to train with Stu Hart, patriarch of the famous Hart wrestling family. While in training, Jim fell in love with Stu's daughter Ellie, and married her. This made him an official member of one of the most famous families in professional wrestling. Niedhart became brother-in-law to all the Hart brothers, including Bret "The Hit Man," Owen, Ross, and Keith. He was also a brother-in-law to Davey Boy Smith and uncle to Teddy Hart and Harry Smith. Jim is also the father of WWE Diva Natalya.

Quite a professional wrestling family, and all started by Stu Hart being introduced to future wife Helen on the beaches of Long Beach, New York, by lifeguard Paul Boesch. Boesch was always proud of that introduction.

Another interesting event was the December 7th debut of Jose Lothario's protegé Shawn Michaels. All you good professional wrestling fans know the rest of his story. Another protégé of Jose Lothario, Gorgeous Gino Hernandez, returned to the Houston Wrestling mat wars that month as he took on Kerry Von Erich. It was one of Gorgeous Gino's last appearances in the Houston Wrestling ring.

Attendance at live events and television ratings climbed as we headed into 1985. A Super Sunday Spectacular on January 6, 1985, launched the season. The Rock N Roll Express took on Chavo and Hector Guerrero in tag team action, while Hacksaw Butch Reed battled Kamala, the Ugandan Giant. Hacksaw Jim Duggan and Terry Gordy faced Ted Dibiase and Sheik Hercules in a special tag team event. Gorgeous Gino Hernandez, Steve Dr. Death Williams, and Shawn Michaels also saw action on the big Sunday kick-off.

The Houston Wrestling promotion experienced its first-ever canceled live show due to weather on Friday, February 1, when Houston was hit with a devastating ice storm. World wars, assassinations, and severe weather hadn't stopped us before. But this storm was different. It presented a severe danger to traveling wrestlers and to the thousands of wrestling fans who would have also been on the road. Even KHTV called and wanted to cancel television production that night so that their production crew could stay at home and be safe! Canceling the show was the most responsible thing to do, though it cost the promotion a lot of money.

Another first for Houston Wrestling was the promotion of a live show on Wednesday night, February 20, 1985. There were several reasons for the Wednesday night promotion, but the most important one was a willingness of the promotion to try something new. It was neither a failure nor a big success, but fans made it clear they liked live shows on Friday nights and occasionally Sundays.

There was also the first co-promotion of a live Houston Wrestling show on Easter Sunday, April 7, 1985 between the Houston Wrestling promotion, Mid-South Sports, and the Dallas booking office. It was a symbolic event demonstrating cooperation between so-called regional promotions as they confronted the challenge of WWF and Vince McMahon.

Kerry Von Erich challenged “Nature Boy” Ric Flair for the World Title. There was also a four-team tag team tournament for $100,000, featuring The Rock-N-Roll Express, The Dirty White Boys, The Midnight Express, and The Fabulous Freebirds. Terry Taylor grappled with Kamala for the North American Title. Other superstars who saw action that night were Gorgeous Gino Hernandez, Jake “the Snake” Roberts, One Man Gang, Steve “Dr. Death” Williams, and the Barbarian.

The Houston Wrestling promotion also tried for a Father’s Day live show on Sunday June 16, 1985. Sunday live shows were starting to take hold with Houston Wrestling fans because of the push the Houston Wrestling promotion could give Sunday promotions with Saturday night and Sunday morning television shows. Announcing on television that the ticket office is open all day Sunday and that the live show is just a few hours away is very effective. Occasional Sunday shows allowed the promotion to tap a different segment of the wrestling market since some fans either worked on Friday nights or felt Sunday promotions were easier to attend.

Stars like Eddie Gilbert, Dutch Mantell, and the Fantastics joined Mid-South Wrestling’s impressive array of talent. There was also the return of favorites like Wahoo McDaniel, World Champion Ric Flair, and even Cowboy Bill Watts, who put on wrestling tights for special events. General Skandor Akbar had put together the “Zambuie Express” consisting of Kamala and Kareem Muhammed to add more competition to the lineup of top ranked tag teams. National Wrestling Alliance World Champion Ric Flair was making regular appearances since the NWA and the Houston Wrestling promotion had worked out their differences and regained each others’ trust.

The Houston Wrestling promotion changed in other ways, as I purchased Nick Bockwinkel’s stock. Though it had been a great investment for Bockwinkel, there were other factors in his decision to sell out. I bought his stock more out of respect for Nick than any other reason. Nick Bockwinkel is one of the true class acts of professional wrestling, both in the ring and outside the squared circle. He was one of my favorites and I will always be grateful for the contribution he made to the Houston Wrestling promotion, and how he helped my promotion of the Friday, May 14, record-setting show. That show helped elevate my career, and made me an equal partner with Paul Boesch and Bill Watts. But what I respected

more than anything else about Nick Bockwinkel was his friendship. I cherish it to this day.

Our television ratings were so strong that KHTV Channel 39 expanded the Houston Wrestling television show to two full hours both on Saturday night and Sunday morning. The format remained the same one used for the last couple of years. Paul Boesch and I hosted *Houston Wrestling* while Jim Ross and various other guest announcers were the hosts of the *Mid-South Wrestling* portion of the action. To give the television show as much continuity as possible, Jim Ross was a guest ringside commentator with Paul Boesch and me. I enjoyed working with Ross not only because he was very talented, but because he was a true survivor. It was that ability that enabled him to have a very successful career in the professional wrestling business.

We'd had a very successful 1985, weathering the turbulent industry. What would 1986 bring?

The Two-Ring Battle Royal had now expanded to a Twenty-Five-Man athletic event. With all the changes taking place in the promotion, it was comforting to hold onto some traditions that provided stability.

Tag team action remained one of the focal points of the Houston Wresting ring wars as the Famous Sheepherders came to Houston along with The Fabulous Ones, Steve Kiern and Stan Lane. Tag team shows were one of Bill Watt’s strong suits, and he knew how to get the most out of his wrestlers’ skills.

On Friday, February 14, 1986, Paul Boesch was introduced inside the ring and given a standing ovation by Houston Wrestling fans, who had found out that Boesch had been in the hospital weeks earlier for heart surgery. He'd received a quadruple bypass and was doing fine after the operation. That was his first night back to the live matches.

But then there was devastating news of the tragic death of Gorgeous Gino Hernandez.

Gino’s real name was Charles Eugene Wolfe, Jr. He was born on August 14, 1957. As a little boy, he knew that he was going to be professional wrestler just like his step dad Luis. He started training at a very early age. As a teenager, he trained under Jose Lothario, who treated Gino as his own son.

As I mentioned, Gino Hernandez made his professional wrestling debut at Houston Wrestling in 1973. He quickly became a big crowd favorite, but later changed from a “baby face” to a “heel” by turning on his mentor Lothario. But whether Gino was a good or bad guy, fans admired his wrestling talent. Outside the ring, Gorgeous Gino was a tremendous showman, and socialized with Hollywood stars such as Farah Fawcett and other beautiful actresses. His flair earned him a reputation of being second only to the legendary Gorgeous George for his flamboyant wrestling style. Gino was only twenty-eight years old when he died, leaving behind a lovely daughter who he loved dearly. His death was ruled a suicide, but that did not satisfy everyone’s suspicions. Gino’s death was extremely tragic, since an extraordinary man was taken from us when he was so young and had much of his life left to live. Gino was a very dear friend of mine and I still miss him.

Wild politics still ruled the wrestling business. Boesch said it best when he stated that professional wrestling was beginning to look like a bowl of alphabet soup. Professional wrestling already had the NWA, AWA, WCW, and WWF. Then came the newest ingredient, the UWF. The newly-formed Universal Wrestling Federation was the brainchild of Cowboy Bill Watts, its President and Chief Executive Officer. The name was designed to give Bill Watts' wrestling organization a more universal appeal, especially for his television show as it caught on in other markets across the country. The Mid-South Sports professional wrestling organization was no more. The Houston Wrestling promotion would promote under the UWF’s banner.

The first order of business for President Bill Watts was to establish a new UWF Champion. Houston was selected for the single-elimination fifteen-match one-night tournament. The city was one of the top markets in the wrestling business, and Houston Wrestling had KHTV’s Channel 39 television production truck there to record every single match of the historic tournament. It took place on Friday, May 30, 1986, at the Sam Houston Coliseum. Terry Gordy, of The Fabulous Freebirds, was the ultimate winner and the brand new UWF Champion!

Another highlight of the 1986 season was August 9, 1986, when the Houston Wrestling promotion hosted the Wrestling Fans International Association National Convention. It was a lot of fun to greet wrestling fans from all over the country. They watched professional wrestling and had an opportunity to visit with wrestlers and promoters one on one. The WFIA

was founded by professional wrestling fans, and everybody--fans, wrestlers, and promoters--had a great time that weekend.

During the summer of 1986, things started to get tense between the UWF and the Houston Wrestling promotion. The UWF changed the booking office's cost structure. At the same time, the City of Houston changed the lease for the Sam Houston Coliseum, increasing rental fees and staffing by almost one hundred percent, which made it more difficult to make money. The State of Texas continued to enforce an additional 6.25% sales tax on all wrestling tickets, in addition to the 3% state commission tax which had been levied against professional wrestling live gates since the thirties.

When I approached Bill Watts and showed him how the numbers would not allow an independent local promotion like Houston Wrestling to last much longer, he asked if I wanted to be bought out. After careful thought, I said yes. Watts instructed me to come up with a written proposal, which I did and handed to him. Watts never got around to giving me an answer or counter proposal. To this day, I am not sure whether he was sincere in wanting to buy me out or whether he was just buying time. Either way, the winds of change were at hurricane-force around the Houston Wrestling promotion. Something would have to give.

Believing that Watts was sincere in wanting to buy my interest in the Houston Wrestling promotion, I moved to Huntsville, Texas, and starting teaching at Sam Houston State University, my Alma Mater. I commuted back and forth so I could continue my involvement in the Houston Wrestling promotion until a deal could be worked out with Bill Watts. That deal never took place.

Changes were taking place in the ring, in the dressing room, in the promotional office and even in the Houston Wrestling arena program. The last program was written and sold on September 21, 1986. That marked the end of an era. For over forty years there was a Houston Wrestling arena program sold at the live wrestling matches. The arena programs sold after that date were the UWF official bulletin, written for the entire UWF territory, and personalized for Houston Wrestling by a one-page insert. It was becoming more and more a UWF promotion than a Houston Wrestling promotion.

Since there were no Houston Wrestling programs being written from September 21, 1986, through May of 1987, details of the various periodic

promotions are sketchy. One thing was for certain; with every UWF/Houston Wrestling promotion during that time, things were getting more tense and challenging. Looking back after over twenty years, the blame for the deteriorating situation cannot be fully laid on the dramatic changes in the professional wrestling business. There were other factors, including poor communication, mistrust, and a certain amount of paranoia.

Finally, just like a piece of metal snaps from metal fatigue, the Houston Wrestling promotion's relationship with Bill Watts snapped. Could it have been avoided? Possibly if there had been better communication, but then again, maybe it was fate.

Boesch heard rumors that the UWF and Bill Watts were negotiating with a competitor, Jim Crockett and the National Wrestling Alliance, on a possible merger. Despite Paul Boesch's attempts to speak with Bill Watts, the two men never were able to discuss the rumors nor any of the other challenges facing the Houston Wrestling promotion. In desperation, Boesch called Jim Barnett of the World Wrestling Federation and arranged a meeting. He was assured that if he felt the time had come for a change, all it would take would be one phone call and the WWF with Vince McMahon would be there to answer.

In the spring of 1987, Paul Boesch made that phone call.

Boesch's call to the World Wrestling Federation opened a new chapter to the over sixty-year history of the Houston Wrestling promotion. He was very excited about the move, and so were Vince McMahon and the WWF. The agreement made over the phone was simple:the WWF would furnish the wrestling talent, and the Houston Wrestling promotion would handle the television and all other promotional duties. The financial details were left open since Vince McMahon said he wanted to fly down and discuss them in person. Vince assured the Houston Wrestling promotion that the financial breakdown would be fair to both parties. Both Boesch and Vince were anxious to move forward and begin the new working relationship. But was it a new beginning, or was it the beginning of the end?

Even though Houston Wrestling promoted a few live wrestling shows in conjunction with the Universal Wrestling Federation, the significant 1987 wrestling season started with Boesch's call to the WWF. Incidentally, Bill Watts and Jim Crockett did make a deal. However, by the time they chose to inform Boesch of the details, it was too late.

It was a total shock to Houston Wrestling television fans when in May of 1987 they turned on their television sets to witness the historic transition from the UWF to the powerful World Wrestling Federation under the direction of Vince McMahon. The move was quick and decisive.

The first live professional wrestling show promoted by the Houston Wrestling promotion and the WWF took place on Friday May 15, 1987. Vince flew the big stars down to Houston so that Paul Boesch and I could do live interviews for the Houston Wrestling television show. It was imperative to establish the personal association between wrestlers and fans as soon as possible. My first television interview with a WWF superstar was with Randy “Macho Man” Savage. He had just signed to take on Ricky “The Dragon” Steamboat for the WWF Intercontinental Title in the upcoming main event. As this story is being written, I am still saddened by the tragic news of the death of Randy Savage on May 20, 2011--just a few days ago at the time of this writing.

Randy was a second-generation professional wrestler. His father was the famous Angelo Poffo, who had starred at Houston Wrestling during the fifties and sixties under the guidance of manager Bronko Lubich. Randy’s younger brother, Lanny Poffo, was also a professional wrestler. Most wrestling fans will remember Randy’s colorful style, including his flamboyant outfits and his raspy voice screaming, “Ooh yeah!” Fans will also remember his beautiful manager “Miss Elizabeth,” who was Randy’s wife at one time though later they divorced. Randy “Macho Man” Savage was a true professional wrestling superstar, and a man who lived life to the fullest.

When Vince McMahon came to the Houston Wrestling Ticket Office at 1919 Caroline, he was impressed with the hundreds of professional wrestling pictures on display all along the walls. Vince always had a great deal of respect for the history of professional wrestling, demonstrated by the great professional wrestling Hall of Fame that he has founded. However, Vince was not there to look at the pictures. He was there to talk business. He quickly laid out the financial proposal for the new working relationship. Silence followed the presentation.

I finally spoke up and diplomatically explained that the proposed breakdown of the gate receipts would not work for the Houston Wrestling promotion. I knew the numbers since I had also been the bookkeeper for the Houston Wrestling promotion for over ten years. Vince politely listened to

my concerns, then said he felt that my calculations were based on the past Houston Wrestling gates and not the new much higher gates that the WWF would draw. He went on to state that we should give him and the WWF a few live shows to prove his point, and if the gates did not increase enough to make the new financial arrangement work for the Houston Wrestling promotion, we would sit back down and renegotiate. He suggested that Boesch and I be patient and give him a chance to prove his point. In a spirit of cooperation, Paul Boesch and I agreed.

Vince McMahon and the WWF wrestling organization were extremely cooperative and supportive. I still recall how, just minutes after talking to Vince McMahon for the first time on the phone, I received a phone call from his wife, Linda. She was very excited about the new arrangement and wanted to let me know that she and the WWF would do whatever it took to make it work. I enjoyed working with Linda McMahon. She was very enthusiastic and extremely efficient. At the time of this writing, she is making her second run for the United States Senate. Anyone who could keep Vince and the rest of the wrestlers in line will have little trouble whipping the United States Senate into shape.

Vince and the WWF provided great wrestling talent and tremendous support on television. The Houston Wrestling promotion matched their tremendous effort. Yet, despite a one hundred and ten percent effort by both parties, the numbers did not work for the Houston Wrestling promotion.

When Boesch voiced his concern and his desire to renegotiate the arrangement, Vince McMahon informed Boesch that the arrangement was off. Boesch was shocked and crushed. There were no more options. After over sixty years of success, the Houston Wrestling promotion would have to close its doors. After fifty-five years in professional wrestling, Boesch's career was suddenly over. No final farewell. No final curtain call.

I was vacationing in Las Vegas with my father when I was paged in the casino and was told there was an emergency phone call. My heart began pounding and my eyes filled with tears. I knew my uncle had heart problems, so I feared the worse. I picked up the phone and identified myself to the casino phone operator, who connected me with the caller.

What a relief it was when I recognized my uncle's voice. But the relief did not last long as Boesch, his voice cracking with emotion, told me about Vince's phone call and that we would have to shut our doors. I swallowed hard and, after the initial shock, I told my uncle not do anything

until I got back to Houston. I assured him that I was catching the next flight and that I would think of something. After hanging up, I called Vince McMahon and asked him to please not do anything until I returned to Texas , and I would call him the next day. Vince told me he would wait for my phone call.

My head was spinning. I had already started teaching at Sam Houston State University. I had invested my professional wrestling income well, and was financially secure. But I was overwhelmed by the thought that my uncle would not be able to retire with dignity and integrity from the business that he loved so much.

There had to be an answer. There had to be a solution. There had to be a better way to wrap up the arrangement with Vince and the WWF. My wheels started turning. The first flight back to Houston was in the early morning the next day, so there was no sleeping that night, only tossing and turning and a lot of frantic brainstorming.

On the flight, I scribbled ideas on the cocktail napkin that accompanied the cup of coffee served right after take-off. As I wrote, it started to come together. It would be critical to convince Vince McMahon that it would be to the best interest of the WWF if this transition was done with class and dignity. Paul Boesch deserved a final curtain call!

The carrot I planned to offer to Vince McMahon consisted of several factors. First and most important, as part of the deal the Houston Wrestling promotion would give Vince and the WWF its television arrangement with KHTV, Channel 39. The record-setting Houston Wrestling television show would be a tremendous asset to Vince as he continued the effort to establish the WWF in the Houston market. A second selling point was that a Paul Boesch retirement extravaganza would capture the headlines of professional wrestling magazines and publications all across the nation. Numerous publications would feature the story of legendary Paul Boesch turning the reins of the famous Houston Wrestling promotion over to Vince McMahon. Vince would be smart enough to realize that the national spotlight of professional wrestling would be shining on the Houston Wrestling ring as Boesch stepped down and passed the torch to Vince and the WWF. The third and final selling point was that it was just the right thing to do, a way to carry through the transition with class and dignity. I hoped that Vince would recognize that fact and be convinced that a Paul Boesch Extravaganza was indeed the answer.

The proposal included a very fair financial package for the Houston Wrestling promotion. Boesch would have his well-deserved last appearance and would surely make professional wrestling history. Vince McMahon would have the attention of the professional wrestling world as millions of fans witnessed him enjoying another major promotional conquest.

The plane landed and I headed straight to the Houston Wrestling ticket office, cocktail napkin and scribbled notes in hand. I frantically organized my ideas and took a deep breath as I dialed Vince's number. Once I reached Vince, I asked him to please listen to the entire proposal before giving an answer. Immediately I started talking and kept talking--I did not want to give Vince a chance to politely say “No.” I saved the best part for last, stressing that the Houston Wrestling television time period would become his, and Paul Boesch would retire and turn the reins of the world famous Houston Wrestling promotion over to him! Victory would be his!

Silence. After what seemed like an eternity, Vince broke the quiet. He simply said, “Let’s do it!”

I will always be grateful for Vince McMahon and his willingness to cooperate on the “Paul Boesch Retirement Extravaganza.” It was a very lucrative deal for Vince, but to this day I feel that the financial incentives were not the deciding factor. McMahon did it because it was just the right thing to do. He respected the business and individuals like Boesch, who gave their lives to the business they loved. It was a class act by Vince McMahon, and everybody came out a winner in a situation that seemed headed for disaster.

Vince and the WWF furnished one of the greatest wrestling cards in the history of professional wrestling. The Extravaganza set a record at the box office and for historic action in the Houston Wrestling ring. Everyone involved in the show felt it was an honor to be a part of it, and gave the event everything they had. Wrestling fans still talk to me about that show nearly twenty-five years after the fact. Vince also flew in professional wrestling stars and dignitaries from all around the business, just to participate in the activities surrounding the event. McMahon took it one step further, and organized a wonderful retirement party at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Houston to honor Paul Boesch and give him one last chance to visit with his many dear friends in the business. It was a true extravaganza for wrestling fans, television viewers, and most importantly, Boesch. On television he congratulated Vince McMahon, and symbolically

announced that McMahon was the new “King of Houston Wrestling.” Long live the new King!

This is the storybook ending of this classic wrestling story.

Boesch and I had the opportunity to say goodbye and thank all our wrestling fans, both on the Houston Wrestling television show and in front of the record-setting crowd at the Sam Houston Coliseum that night. I remember holding back my emotions as best as possible, and I recall my uncle’s voice cracking and choking at times. It all started to sink in. This is it. Up until that point I had focused so much on putting the huge extravaganza together and vigorously promoting it. There had been no time to think about the true significance of the moment. My uncle was saying good-bye to the business that had been his life for over fifty-five years. I was saying goodbye to the business that I had grown up in and worked in over twenty-five years. Houston Wrestling had been a major part of my life. Now it was coming to an end. An eerie feeling of uncertainty accompanied the emotional goodbyes. What would it be like to live without professional wrestling at the nucleus of my being?

After all the ring introductions of the many professional wrestling dignitaries in attendance, and the goodbyes from Paul Boesch and me, we exited the ring. The crowd was cheering as I noticed my uncle stop halfway up the aisle to look around, absorbing every sound and every vision so that he could remember that special moment for the rest of his life.

As we were about to enter the dressing room, I turned to Lou Thesz and commented, “I cannot believe it is over!”

Thesz looked straight into my eyes and said, “Not for you, Pete. You are too young and it is in your blood. It will always be in your blood.”

Lou Thesz was right. It was not completely over that night. There was still one more chapter left for the Houston Wrestling promotion--the last and final chapter. But first, I must give credit to everyone that made Houston Wrestling possible.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

For many decades, the professional wrestling business was a family business. Many of the regional promotions were owned and managed by various wrestling families, including the Gagnes, the Harts, the Von Erichs, the Grahams, the Crocketts, the Watts, the Funks, the Blanchards, and, of course, the McMahons. Even after the WWE took their corporate promotion worldwide, the McMahon family was heavily involved in many of the key promotional roles.

Houston Wrestling was not an exception. As you have already read, the Houston Wrestling promotion was started by the Sigel brothers, Julius and Morris. Later, their entire family became involved, including the Burkes. That proud family tradition continued when, in 1967, Paul Boesch bought the Houston Wrestling promotion and the Boesch/Birkholz families took over.

Paul Boesch and my father, John Birkholz, were always brothers to whomever they met, and more importantly, to each other. Paul Boesch had no children, so he was a caring uncle who took the Birkholz children under his wing. We were all very close, which became very important to the business of promoting Houston Wrestling.

My father John Birkholz handled the business office and worked closely with my mother, Rosalie Birkholz, in the arena box office. I started working as my uncle's arena assistant when I was eleven years old. My brother Bill worked in various roles ranging from supervising ticket takers, selling tickets, and later as the supervisor of the wrestling merchandise sales. My sister Denise was a very valuable asset as she helped sell tickets and merchandise. My oldest brother Howard did not live in Houston and so was not able to be as involved in all the action and excitement of working in a professional wrestling promotion, but he was there when he could be.

The Birkholz family was always there for Paul Boesch. On several slow nights, we returned our pay envelopes to Paul. Family was family! We enjoyed the fun and excitement together, but we also shared the sacrifices just like so many of the other family wrestling promotions throughout the country.

It was a real blessing to have such a dedicated family as I began to promote independently in the markets surrounding Houston. My mother ran the box office, and what more could a sports promoter ask for than to have his mother handle all the cash? Many times, my father handled the critical role of head of security, which was extremely important at the live performances. He also made sure that everybody bought a ticket, which was quite a challenge when you traveled to a new market as the Out-of-Town promoter. He also had the demanding job of working with the local police to make sure that neither wrestlers nor fans got hurt. My brother Bill handled the ticket takers and the merchandise sales. My sister Denise helped sell tickets and filled in wherever she was needed.

Even after they had put in a hard day's work at their regular jobs, my family was there for me. We all piled into the big travel van and spent hours driving to far-away arenas. Sometimes we would not get back home until 1:00 or 2:00 am. Then my supportive family had to teach and work the next day with little sleep. Sometimes we ran two or three consecutive nights. What amazes me is that they still talk to me! I was truly blessed to have such a wonderful and supportive family, and I will always be grateful for the way they were there for me and for the Houston Wrestling Promotion.

I am sure this same gratitude is felt by dozens of professional wrestling promoters, who through the many decades of promoting professional wrestling were also blessed with supportive families. Three cheers and hats off to the hundreds of family members and friends around the nation who helped family wrestling promotions thrive and survive. Their sacrifices and dedication enabled us, the promoters, to enjoy the spotlight of success. It was indeed a family business!

Many other individuals worked the regional promotions and became so-called extended members of the promotional family. The Houston Wrestling promotion was blessed to have many of those very special people, including John and Gigi Lampson, Hank, Darlene, and Denice Snow, Melvin Clemons, Mr. Torres, Pat Malone, and Herman Sporn.

There was Roger Cody, who for over twenty-five years was the head usher at the wrestling matches. Roger was also a dedicated Shriner. Each week, he used his pay envelope to buy souvenirs and refreshments for the small children in the crowd.

There were Pat Hatchell and Thomas Fooshee, who for decades were our ring seconds, always there to support the wrestlers and take their robes back to the dressing room once the match had started.

There was J.C. Bankston and the hundreds of other Houston Police officers, who through all the years worked the wrestling matches keeping everyone safe.

There were the colorful ringside announcers like Boyd Pierce, Clete Dumpster, Bob Stephenson and race car promoter Ed Hamblen.

There were the loyal television sponsors like Mr. Norman, I.W. Marks, Eddie's Mobile Homes, Levitz Jewelers, Fingers Furniture, and, most famous of all, Jim McIngvale of Gallery Furniture. For many years, McIngvale has talked about how he got his business started by being a sponsor of the Houston Wrestling television show. It did not take long for Jim to have Houston Wrestling fans convinced that he was indeed the man who could "Save You Money!"

There was also the Nelson Family, who were very involved with the Houston Wrestling promotion. Gil Nelson was the head engineer for the Channel 39 remote production truck. Clare was a long time medic for the wrestlers, and their daughter Alice was a big help both at the ticket office and as an official photographer of the Houston Wrestling promotion.

Finally, I want to give a very special salute to John and Gigi Lampson for their many years of dedicated service. Gigi's sister, Michelle Serna, also deserves a very special thank you. John was extremely valuable to the Houston Wrestling promotion when he managed the ticket office during its later years. They are very good friends and provided tremendous support to the Houston Wrestling promotion and to me.

MEN OF HONOR

During the twenty-five years that I was in the professional wrestling business, wrestlers and promoters worked together under a code of honor. You respected that code and expected the people you worked with to abide by it as well. And they did. Your word was your bond and your handshake was your contract.

Having been involved in over a thousand professional wrestling shows, I witnessed countless occasions on which that the code of honor was severely tested. Yet no matter how tough the test, the code always prevailed. Whether it was a wrestler or a promoter, the result was still the same. The code was respected and followed.

If a wrestler gave a promoter a date, he would be there. If a promoter made an agreement with a wrestler, he would honor that agreement no matter what the situation. As a promoter, I would book an arena, commit to an advertising campaign, print the tickets, book other wrestlers, hire staff, and make other financial commitments solely on the word of a wrestler. It did not make any difference if that verbal commitment was made in person, on the phone, or some other means of communication. The business survived on that code for many decades, until it was forced to change in an ever-shifting world.

My favorite example of the code is booking Andre the Giant. Andre would simply come up to me in the dressing room and pull out his calendar book. He asked if I was interested in having him come work a certain date. That future date could be as far away as six to eight months. Of course I was always interested and verbally agreed. We wrote the date down in our respective calendar books and that made it official. I would not talk to Andre or have any other communications with him all those months. He traveled around the world wrestling for dozens of other promoters in front

of millions of wrestling fans, but I knew Andre the Giant would show up on his date. I did not hesitate to advertise, whether it was on radio, in newspapers, or on television that Andre the Giant was coming to Houston Wrestling. I stood in front of the television cameras and put my reputation on the line, telling Houston Wrestling fans that they should get their tickets early!

That date came and I had an arena jam-packed with wrestling fans ready to see Andre the Giant. Sure enough, Andre walked into that dressing room whether he had to fly in from Japan, Europe, or a major market in the United States. I knew he would be there. He knew I would honor my end of the agreement by having him in a top match and doing everything I could to draw a great crowd so that he would have a great pay-off. Our word was our bond. Those were the good old days.

The code of honor went beyond verbal booking commitments. It also included the unwritten commitment that promoters and wrestlers made to each other as they worked together to do what was best for the business. Promoters made every effort to promote the shows and draw as many fans as possible. Wrestlers made every effort to help the promoter draw fans by putting on a great show when the ring lights turned on. There were times I reached into my wallet and paid wrestlers more than their percentages when the box office receipts had suffered through a slow night. There were times wrestlers taped up broken hands, broken bones, or other painful injuries so that they could wrestle. They made those sacrifices so that the town and reputation of the promoter was not hurt by substitutions. The code of honor was not just a convenience. It was the backbone of the professional wrestling business. Over twenty years later, I still feel a great wave of gratitude to all the wrestlers who wrestled hurt or gave a great show even on nights that the gates were low. They were truly men of honor.

No story is complete unless it includes people and events that go beyond the call of honor and duty. Houston Wrestling, like so many regional promotions, firmly believed that you should always give back to the community. There are so many stories about Morris Sigel’s kind heart and, of course, Paul Boesch left a tremendous legacy of helping others. However, there are also hundreds of stories concerning the wrestlers themselves. Time will not allow me to tell them all, but there are a few I would to like to share with my heart full of pride.

“Nature Boy” Ric Flair is one of the most colorful and outstanding wrestlers of our time. Many of you are aware of his many accomplishments in wrestling, including the historic number of times he won the NWA World Heavyweight Title. He is a tremendous athlete and a record-setting box office attraction. What many of you do not know is that he is also a man with a heart of gold that matches the gold championship belts he has often worn around his waist. I have witnessed firsthand numerous acts of kindness on his part. The following is my favorite Ric Flair story.

A teenage Houston Wrestling fan was stricken with cystic fibrosis. This young man was determined to not let his illness stop him from living life and came to the wrestling matches as often as possible, whenever he was not in the hospital. He was a big Houston Wrestling fan, and even bigger Ric Flair fan.

One Friday morning, his parents called the wrestling ticket office. They told me that he was in the hospital and was not expected to come back out. I expressed my sadness and asked if there was anything I could do to help. They told me, “No, thank you, it is now in the hands of the Lord.” After hanging up, I realized maybe there was something I *could* do.

That night, we were having a huge wrestling show at the Coliseum, and World Champion Ric Flair was flying in to defend his title. I called the hospital and they gave me the phone number of the teenage wrestling fan’s hospital room. I prayed that Ric Flair would understand and put the phone number into my coat pocket.

I knew that Flair was coming in on a very long flight and would be tired. He would also need a lot of time to get ready for his big match. Nevertheless, I determined to ask him for a very special favor. As Ric walked into the dressing room, I quickly approached him and started to tell the story. When I explained this young man’s battle with cystic fibrosis, Ric took the phone number out of my hand. I didn't even finish the story. He put his bag down, went to the nearest phone booth, and had a long conversation with this special young wrestling fan. It was a class act.

That Monday morning, we received a call from the parents. Sadly, our courageous wrestling fan had passed away. They talked about how their son bragged to the doctors and nurses all weekend about how World Heavyweight Champion Ric Flair had called him personally to wish him well. They wanted to thank me, Paul Boesch, and most importantly, Ric Flair. Flair spent years bragging on television networks around the world

that “To be the Man, you must beat the Man!” After that Friday night, in my mind, Ric Flair will always be “The Man.”

But the wrestler who may have done more than any other in the world was Andre the Giant. Wrestling promoters around the globe billed him as “The Eighth Wonder of the World.” Time and time again, he made himself available to Paul Boesch and me to visit children hospitals, schools, and centers for handicapped children. Any place where he could touch the hearts of kids, the giant was there. This was a man who traveled around the world and wrestled over 325 times a year. Although his time was valuable, he would never pass up the opportunity to help a child no matter what the situation. He always spotted children in wheelchairs in the arena and asked me to bring them back to the dressing room, where he would visit with them and sign their wrestling programs, much to the kids’ delight. He made them feel very special.

Andre passed away on January 27, 1993. The world lost a giant of a man, and heaven gained a huge treasure. I am confident that the Lord found room in Heaven for Andre--every inch and every pound. I wish I would have had one more moment with him so that I could have thanked him once more, not only for myself, but also for the millions of people whose lives he touched. Goodbye Andre, and may the Lord be with you. No one will be able to fill your giant footprints.

Wahoo McDaniel was another Houston Wrestling superstar with a generous heart. He constantly made himself available for appearances at public schools and local hospitals. One story, which remains very special to me, takes place when we made a trip together to the Center for the Mentally Retarded in Houston.

I drove out to the airport to pick up Wahoo, who was flying in from the east coast. A hard worker, he sometimes wrestled seven to ten matches a week. He was one of the busiest in the business, and, this particular morning, he was exhausted. I asked if he was still willing to make his appearance at the Center for the Mentally Retarded, or if he wanted to go straight to the motel to rest. I will never forget the look he gave me before he said that he would never disappoint those children.

We arrived at the back of the Center for the Mentally Retarded, next to the door to the big assembly room. Wahoo stepped out of the car and quickly put on his Indian headdress. You would not believe the huge roar that came from the handicapped children when we entered the room. Wahoo

immediately went into his famous Indian war dance, and the cheers from the children became deafening. They rushed towards Wahoo with smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes, overwhelmed that Indian Chief Wahoo McDaniel came to visit and did his war dance just for them!

It has been said that the Lord will always compensate any disadvantages we may have. In the case of handicapped children, I have witnessed how the Lord compensates them by putting more love into their hearts than many us could ever pray for. The children stood in line to hug and kiss Wahoo. You should have seen the outpouring of love from all those kids, and how Wahoo hugged and kissed them back. Even as I tell this story over twenty-five years later, I still get a very emotional lump in my throat. Thanks, Wahoo--not only from all the special children at the Center for the Mentally Retarded, but also from a young wrestling promoter who discovered a whole new meaning of love that day.

These were only three of the hundreds of stories of Houston Wrestling stars who gave their time and part of their lives to improve the lives of others. For nearly a century, the Houston Wrestling promotion, through its wrestlers, personnel and promoters, gave back to the community. It was always done with affection and appreciation.

THE LAST CHAPTER

After the Paul Boesch Retirement Extravaganza was over, there was no time to consider the significant changes that were taking place, because there was too much work to do. As part of the arrangement with Vince McMahon, I was to stay on for a couple more live matches to help with the transition from the traditional Houston Wrestling promotion to the new WWF promotion. It was quite an experience to witness the transition firsthand--definitely out with the old and in with the new. The WWF had its own philosophy and way of doing things. Who could argue? They were a very successful organization and believed in their methods and approaches.

Paul Boesch and I had agreed that Vince and the WWF could use our well-established wrestling ticket office at 1919 Caroline during the transition. Now that ticket office, which had one of the most famous addresses in the Houston sports world, is gone, replaced by a multi-level parking garage for St. Joseph Hospital. It was too hard for Boesch to come to the office during the transition. I did not blame him because it was difficult for me as well. If it was not for the fact that I had given my word to Vince McMahon that I would help, I would not have been there either.

One day, shortly after the transition, Paul Boesch and I were at the office preparing to shut it down once and for all. Boesch had already sold the property to St. Joseph Hospital. Though he had an entire year to vacate the premises, psychologically it did him good to start the long and emotional process of closing the office then. We spent just as much time talking and laughing about the good old days as we did actually working. Every picture off the wall and every piece of furniture moved launched my uncle into another story. Looking back, I realize now it was part of the process of saying goodbye.

Several incidents provided much-needed comic relief. One time when I was on the ladder taking a picture of the great Milo Steinborn off the highest spot on the wall, my hands slipped and the picture crashed to the floor. Paul Boesch picked up the photo and frame. There was not a single scratch on either of them, despite the loud landing. My uncle burst out laughing and said, “Milo always knew how to take a great bump”.

Another time, Boesch was on the ladder taking down the 1919 Caroline sign above the front door of the wrestling ticket office. Boesch said, “I wish I had a nickel for every time I mentioned this address on the air. I could retire.”

I laughed and told him, “Uncle Paul, you do have a nickel for every time you mentioned that address on television, and you are retired.”

My uncle burst out laughing and nearly fell off the ladder. When he carefully came down we hugged, then laughed until we cried. They were tears of joy and sadness. We decided that maybe we should wait a few weeks before continuing to close the office. After all, what was the hurry?

By this time, I was teaching at Sam Houston State University and enjoying my return to the classroom. Although the teaching kept me busy, one question still nagged at me: *What now?* At age thirty-four, was I really through, or did the Lord have something else in mind?

A quick trip to Lake Tahoe after the fall semester gave me an opportunity to hike the Desolation Wilderness trail at Emerald Lake and quietly meditate on a very special rock next to a hidden mountain lake. I guess many of us have these special spots which allow us to go into deep reflection and prayer. For me it was that big rock without a single soul around. While sitting there, I asked the Lord for a sign. A sign to let me know what he wanted me to do next. I was eager to move forward and I was hoping he was ready to open up that new door.

I did not have to wait long. As soon as I got back to my hotel room, the red message light was blinking. The call was from my uncle, who asked me to phone him as soon as possible. I anxiously did so and asked if he was all right. He assured me that he was fine, then set off the bombshell. “Jim Crockett had called and wants you to call him.”

At that time, Jim Crockett was head of Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. and the main man of the National Wrestling Alliance. He had also been a competitor to the Houston Wrestling promotion while Paul Boesch and I were still promoting. I had met Crockett on several occasions during my

professional wrestling career. I respected the success that he and his organization had in promoting live shows throughout the east and southeast, especially around the Carolinas. I also respected Jim Crockett promotions' successful television network, which included World Championship Wrestling on Ted Turner's Superstation. Remember, Crockett bought out Bill Watts and the Universal Wrestling Federation, and he was also McMahon and the WWF's number one competitor. What could Jim Crockett want?

It was late, so I called the next morning. After a quick "How are you doing?", Crockett got straight to the point. He asked, "Pete, do you want back into wrestling?" I told him I would like to think about it and would call him back. Once again I was hiking in the wilderness, as my mind was weighing all the pros and cons.

What would it be like to work for a professional wrestling promotion that did not involve my uncle? What would it be like working in a wrestling promotion where I would not be the top decision maker, and needed to be satisfied with a limited role? What would it be like to once again work side by side with so many friends that I had left behind? Most importantly--could I walk away from a challenge? Crockett had given me one, so my competitive juices started to flow. I knew I had to take the next step, meet face-to-face with Crockett and hear his offer. When I called and told him so, he said, "Great! I will send down my private plane to pick you up." I hung up the phone and burst out laughing. I never had anybody send down his or her private plane to pick me up. This would be a whole new experience in professional wrestling.

When I arrived at Hobby Airport, I went straight to the hanger. There I was met by my good friend Dusty Rhodes and several other Crockett associates. We quickly boarded the plane. I had a nice visit with Dusty on the flight, and upon landing in Dallas, spotted a limousine waiting on the runway. It was just like a scene in the movies. Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. was in the process of moving its corporate headquarters from Charlotte, North Carolina, to Dallas. Crockett and I met immediately after I arrived at the new corporate headquarters.

After the normal polite introductory chat, Crockett got down to business. I anxiously listened to every word. He said he was looking for a Special Events Coordinator, someone whose main responsibilities were to help coordinate all of the NWA's national television shoots and as well as its

special Pay-Per-View events. One of the planned upcoming PPV events was going to take place in Tokyo, Japan. It would be my job to go there and spend a month coordinating the event with the Japanese wrestling organization. I felt my heart beat faster and faster as Crockett kept talking. When Crockett discussed the Special Events Coordinator's lucrative pay, my promotional blood was pumping. Then came the clincher. Crockett asked, "Do you want Houston Wrestling back?"

Jim Crockett knew that Paul Boesch had agreed to a "no compete" clause with Vince McMahon. I hadn't discussed it with Vince because, at the time, I had no intention of staying in professional wrestling. Vince never brought it up because he was more focused on getting a "no compete" clause out of Paul Boesch. The fact that I agreed to help the WWF in the transition had also seemed to minimize the necessity of a "no compete" clause from Peter Birkholz. I was aware that Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. had promoted a live show in Houston just a few months earlier, and it had not gone well. Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. wanted that personal grassroots connection in the Houston market, one of the top television markets in the nation.

Jim Crockett did not even wait for an answer as he started laying out the details of his Houston Wrestling proposal. Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. and I would be fifty-fifty partners in the newly-formed promotion. I would be the local promoter and handle all the promotional activities, including television, and Jim Crockett Promotions, Inc. would handle the wrestling talent. I considered the tremendous challenge of bringing the "old" Houston Wrestling promotion back to life. It had been four months since I left, and I started to realize that Lou Thesz was right--it was in my blood!

I thanked Jim for the very generous offer and told him I needed to make a couple of quick phone calls. He understood and said that if I agreed to the position, he wanted me at their board of directors meeting later that afternoon. I immediately called my uncle. After hearing the details of the offer, Boesch said I would be crazy not to take the job. I called my dad and he encouraged me to accept the challenge as well, but also warned me to be very careful. I then called my wife since it would mean that, eventually, I would have to move the family from Huntsville to Dallas, Texas. She also gave me the green light. I went back and told Jim Crockett that I would be more than happy to accept the job. He smiled and we shook hands to seal

the deal. “You start January 1, 1988,” he said, “and I will see you at the board meeting.” I was back in!

It was like old times. Jim Crockett and Dusty Rhodes gave me a very nice introduction to the rest of the board. I had worked with many of the board’s members for years. I felt right at home talking about upcoming live shows, ticket sales, television ratings, talent evaluations, and future bookings. It was also exciting to watch the board members’ reactions when Jim Crockett announced that I was the brand new National Wrestling Alliance promoter of Houston. They were as thrilled as I was about the tremendous potential of this new arrangement.

Now came the hard part: saying good-bye to my good friends at Sam Houston State University. I talked to my department head and friend, Dr. Ross Lovell. Ross graciously put his university role aside, and said I would be crazy not to take the challenge, especially the opportunity to work with the Japanese wrestling organization coordinating the Tokyo PPV event. He said with a friendly smile that it was an opportunity to gain some very valuable international working experience.

The first few months of 1988 kept me extremely busy, as I was working hard to learn the ropes at Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. and doing whatever I could to help local promoters with the various special events. At the same time, I was busy negotiating with television stations Channel 20 and Channel 26 in an attempt to once again have the locally-produced professional wrestling show that was so important to the Houston wrestling market. Months of discussion paid off as both stations agreed to work with the National Wrestling Alliance and me in our attempt to bring back Houston Wrestling.

General Manager Vince Barresi of KTXH-TV (Channel 20) agreed to air the syndicated *NWA Main Event* with me as the host every Saturday morning, from 9:00 am to 10:00 am. I would do the opening and closing along with special interviews. I would also provide the voice-over of many of the matches to add the local flavor. Paul Boesch could not be involved in the show due to his “no compete” clause with Vince McMahon. However, he was able to do commercials with his good friends and long-time sponsors Irv Marks and Jim McIngvale of Gallery Furniture. It was going to be an action-packed professional wrestling show featuring NWA main event matches from around the country. This plus my reputation with fans would

be a great combination. A television contract was signed and the first airing would take place on Saturday morning, June 4, 1988.

General manager Jerry Marcus of KRIV-Channel 26 took it one step further and agreed to have his production crew out taping the live matches at the Sam Houston Coliseum and putting together a weekly show featuring that footage. It was the same formula that had been so successful for KHTV-Channel 39 for over twenty years. Paul Boesch would be able to co-host the show with me. It would air on Saturday nights at 10:30 pm, and last an hour. The local show would be followed by another hour of syndicated professional wrestling action from the NWA. The same locally-produced show would air again on Sunday mornings on Channel 26 starting at 10 am. The Channel 26 wrestling shows would start Saturday, May 28th and Sunday, May 29th.

Now that the local television shows were in place, it was time to get the wrestling ticket office at 1919 Caroline back open and functioning. Knowing that I would do a lot of traveling to fulfill my role as the Special Events Coordinator for Jim Crockett Promotions Inc, I had to recruit a good businessman to stay in Houston and manage the office. I talked my friend John Lampson into giving it a try. He was perfect, and did an outstanding job of not only getting the office running efficiently and smoothly, but also taking care of the other million and one things necessary for a successful wrestling promotion.

Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. and I began to promote live Houston Wrestling shows at the Sam Houston Coliseum. Every promotion brought a larger crowd and a bigger gate. The local wrestling shows started to air in late May and early June and provided a big boost to the live promotions. The climax of the return of Houston Wrestling was on July 29, 1988, when the famous American Bash came to the Sam Houston Coliseum. It drew a huge and enthusiastic crowd. Houston Wrestling was indeed on its way back! Or was it?

The winds of change were still whirling. This time it was Jim Crockett Promotions, Inc. and the NWA being tossed around. In an effort to establish some stability during the turbulent times, they were negotiating to be purchased by Turner Entertainment. The rumors were flying, then became facts. Turner Entertainment would buy out Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. and its television network. We were told to get ready to move to Atlanta, Georgia in the months ahead.

I was not as nearly as excited about the news as the rest of the organization. All the hard work and success of bringing back Houston Wrestling was now in jeopardy. With the transition of Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. to Turner Entertainment, no one could give me the answers to some critical questions. Where would the newly-formed Houston Wrestling promotion get its wrestling talent? Where would Houston Wrestling get its television programming? Would the new organization need a Special Events Coordinator? Would that special events coordinator have to move his family to Atlanta, Georgia? The fact that no one was able to answer the questions was an answer in itself. Again, I had to make a weighty decision.

While the rumors were flying, my personal life was changing as well. I had two wonderful sons, Jonathan and Allan, who wanted their Dad to stay home and play. One Saturday morning, while I was saying goodbye before heading to the airport for my next booking, my oldest son, Jonathan, looked up and with tears in his eyes said, “Don’t go, Daddy. Stay here and play.” I glanced over to my other son, Allan, who was looking at me with those same pleading eyes. I told them I had to go, I had a job to do. As if they would understand. They were just children.

On the way to the airport, the wheels inside my head were turning. My boys, who meant the world to me, wanted me at home. Dr. Ross Lovell had a spot for me at Sam Houston State University. Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. could not give me any real answers. I boarded the plane and took my seat. Then came the announcement that the flight was going to be delayed. There was a chance that I would not be able to make my booking. That was it!

My time with my family was more important than anything else in the whole world. It was time for Peter Birkholz to say his last “goodbye.” There was no extravaganzas or ticket tape parades, just the phone call to Jim Barnett, a top executive to Jim Crockett, asking him to set up a personal meeting with Crockett. Barnett asked why I needed a meeting and I told him it was time for me to move on. He was a friend and understood. The meeting with Jim Crockett never took place. Jim Crockett Promotions Inc. moved to Atlanta, and I moved back to Huntsville.

I regret never having the opportunity to personally thank Jim Crockett for the chance to work with him and his fine organization. Although I was frustrated at times because I felt I was not being used to my full capability, I

understood that Jim Crockett was doing the best he could. I enjoyed those nine months with the National Wrestling Alliance as their Special Events Coordinator, and I especially enjoyed the opportunity to bring Houston Wrestling successfully back to the Sam Houston Coliseum. It was a wonderful experience with wonderful memories.

I promoted my last live professional wrestling show at the Sam Houston Coliseum on Friday, September 9, 1988. It was a world title card featuring World Champion Ric Flair against the challenge of powerful Lex Lugar, and a great way to wrap up a career of promoting professional wrestling. I purposely was the last one out of the dressing room that night. As I walked through the silent and empty Sam Houston Coliseum, I could hear my footsteps echo throughout the huge arena. I knew deep in my heart that I had made the right decision. This was finally the end. My exciting and rewarding twenty-five-year career in professional wrestling was over! I would not change them for anything in the world.

Do I miss it?

For over twenty-five years, professional wrestling, and Houston Wrestling in particular, was the focal point of my life. I ate, drank and slept Houston Wrestling. However, since my last live promotion years ago I have only attended a handful of live wrestling shows. The only professional wrestling I have seen on television has been a brief moment here and there as I surf through the channels.

Do I miss it?

I must confess, there are times. There are times even when I am sitting in my back yard and listening to the soothing sounds of the Taylor River in beautiful Colorado, when all of the sudden the world becomes silent. I gently close my eyes and find myself in a frantic free fall through the tunnel of time. I fall faster and faster and begin to hear the sounds of an arena in the final moments of preparation before a professional wrestling show. I smell the freshly popped popcorn. I hear the clanging of hundreds of folding metal chairs being set up at ringside. I hear the sound technician giving one more mike test on the public address system: “Testing, Testing, one, two, three.”

Faster and faster I am falling. Then I am there! In the most magical spot in the entire universe--the middle of the Houston Wrestling ring! The ring lights flash on as thousands of wrestling fans start to cheer, and I bellow into the ring microphone at the top of my lungs—

“WELCOME LADIES AND GENTLEMEN FOR ANOTHER EXCITING NIGHT OF HOUSTON WRESTLING!”

photograph copyright Geoff Winningham
from *Friday Night in the Coliseum*

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[1] Roy, James. “Scotty Moore - City Auditorium - Houston Tx. *Scotty Moore*. n.p., 2012. Web. 26 August 2012. <http://www.scottymoore.net/houstonAud.html>.

[2] *Ibid.*